

# The Comparative Analysis of Murder and Crime-Solving Strategies in Agatha Christie's Works

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni preddiplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i  
pedagogije

Vedran Domjanović

**Komparativna analiza zločina i strategije njegova rješavanja u  
djelima Agathe Christie**

Završni rad

Mentorica: izv. prof. dr. sc. Biljana Oklopčić

Osijek, 2019.

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## **Abstract**

In Agatha Christie's literary career, which spanned over more than fifty years, the tally of murdered people in her mystery works approached three hundred. Her job as a nurse during World War I left a lasting mark on her career because during that period she developed a special interest in chemistry, poisons and drugs, which later influenced her writing style, and using poison became her forte. Consequently, many of her literary characters fell victim to some kind of toxin – arsenic, morphine, sleeping pills and even nicotine, to name a few. However, a large part of her books features a wide array of more violent and manual death causes – strangulation, stabbing, coshing, drowning and many more. Most of those crimes are solved by one of Christie's two most prominent detectives, a professional Belgian detective Hercule Poirot or a white-haired old lady Jane Marple. The former is a well-travelled retired Belgian policeman who gained worldwide fame due to his detective skills, and the latter a likeable spinster who spent most of her years living a rural life and only became an active investigator in the later stage of her life. Due to their different lifestyles, both their characters and investigation methods largely differ, but they are both successful when tackling a crime. The aim of this paper is to analyze some of the murders portrayed in Christie's works, describe the methods used by Monsieur Poirot and Miss Marple of solving the crimes, explain the main features of the two investigators, and compare them and their strategies of unravelling the mysteries surrounding the crime.

**Keywords:** Agatha Christie, detective fiction, murder mystery, crime-solving, Hercule Poirot, Jane Marple.



## **Introduction**

Agatha Christie is the best-selling novelist of all time. She is famous for her murder mysteries, in which she created a number of characters who became household names, most prominently Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple. The vastness of murders these two sleuths encounter are committed by a series of both usual everyday weapons (for instance a dagger) and some unconventional ones (such as a cleaver), but what Christie liked most were poisons – all types of them, even invented ones! The appeal of her books lies in the originality of the murders, reasons behind them, and the methods of solving them that only her mind could come up with and make plausible. Even though she said that the outsider is most often the perpetrator, in her novels there are often no outsiders, since she manages to provide most of the characters with a motive strong enough to commit the crime. The subtle hints she drops throughout the books are often insufficient for the reader to determine the felon until the very end, but still sufficient to keep them intrigued. Therefore, this paper will aim to deal with some of the aspects of her works that make them so attractive to people. The opening chapter will give a brief description of mystery fiction as a literary genre, explain its basic traits, and state Agatha Christie's importance for the genre. The second chapter will give a thorough depiction of the ways Christie kills (or attempts to kill) the victims in some of her mystery works, with the special emphasis on poison, Christie's favourite cause of death, which will be described in more detail in a separate subchapter. The following chapter will be dealing with the appearance, demeanour, and approach to crime-solving of one of the world's most famous fictional detectives, Hercule Poirot, and the same will be done in the next chapter with his female counterpart, Jane Marple. The final chapter will serve as a link between the two sleuths, describing the similarities and differences of the two characters.

## 1. Mystery Fiction and Agatha Christie

Mystery fiction, often referred to as crime fiction, detective fiction and murder mystery, is a literary genre in which the reader is asked to help solve the crime. Its essential ingredients are an element of surprise mixed with an element of detection. However, Carl Malmgren argues that mystery, detective, and crime fiction are not the same, but rather three basic forms of something we term murder fiction (1). According to Joel Goldman, mystery fiction and crime fiction are somewhat different, since crime fiction is a broader term. He defines crime fiction as “the blanket term used to describe books that deal with any aspect of crime – including those who commit and solve it.” In mysteries, the focus of investigation is determining who is responsible for a certain criminal event the plot revolves around, and the protagonist is usually a detective or an amateur investigator who uses their abilities to solve the mystery (Goldman). There is usually a closed circle of suspects, and each of them has both a motive and an opportunity to commit the crime. The detective who solves the mystery does it by using the facts and clues that were previously presented to the reader throughout the book (Wilhelm 142). Malmgren states some of the characteristics of the mystery genre: there is usually one significant scene of the crime (village, estate...); the milieu in which the crime takes place is static and that world is rational – people behave in a certain way to achieve certain ends; the crime is usually planned and premeditated, and the perpetrator is driven by one of the four L’s of mystery fiction mentioned by P. D. James: “love, lust, loathing, lucre” (qtd. in Malmgren 14); premeditation implies that there is a previous connection between the perpetrator and the victim; psychopaths are not acceptable, since they would eliminate the need for the motive, which is extremely relevant in mystery fiction; the importance of the past – something that happened previously triggered the murder/crime, which usually takes place in the introductory part of the story, and throughout the novel the events leading up to the murder are reconstructed, etc. (13-18). Nevertheless, mystery, crime, and detective fiction, as well as detective story, mystery-detective fiction, and whodunit can be used interchangeably to describe Agatha Christie’s scope of work (Bargainnier 2).

Christie’s bibliography can be classified as representing a subgenre of mystery fiction – the “cozy” or classical mystery (Ackershoek 121; Bargainnier 7) – “a subset of the genre that uses a small group of people in a cosy or familiar setting and avoids gruesome details and violence” (Devereux 6). As one of the pioneers of not only the subgenre, but of murder fiction in general as well, Christie was praised by many of her contemporaries and dubbed one of the

masters of classic detective stories, alongside E. C. Bentley and Dorothy Sayers. She belonged to the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, a term coined by Howard Haycraft, used to represent murder mysteries written between the two world wars (Malmgren 4). She is the only female author of the Golden Age who created female detective protagonists (Klein 11), most prominently exemplified by Miss Marple, her prime woman investigator. “Though most people think of detective fiction as principally entertainment, which it is, a case can be made for its being the most intellectual of popular literary forms, and this is especially true of the works of the Golden Age” (Bargainnier 8). The reader is fully engaged in solving the crime, since none of the clues used by the investigator(s) are concealed from the reader (as vowed in an oath designed by The London Detection Club in 1928). Merrill says that almost every Christie’s character introduced has both a reasonable motive and an opportunity to commit the crime. Her novels always feature a large number of suspects (the lowest number is four – in *Cards on the Table*), all of which are roughly equally considered by the investigators, and also Marple and Poirot as Christie’s two main investigators share the belief that anyone might commit murder (88-93). “Each character is of interest to us, for each is a genuine suspect. No one can be fully developed, however, for the very nature of the game requires that Christie spread her attention about equally among her relatively large cast” (Merrill 89).

It is impossible to pinpoint the exact feature of Christie’s books that makes them so attractive to the reader. Hart argues that the appeal of Christie’s style lies in her characters: “Read Christie! There’s reality. Her characters are people everybody knows. Respectable people driven by lust and hatred and greed and dishonesty. That’s reality” (qtd. in Malmgren 8). Her timelessness also lies in her unique style and simplicity: “Agatha Christie continues to appeal to us because she devised intellectual challenges or games of unusual, even unparalleled [*sic*] ingenuity” (Merrill 92). Gill states that she is superior to her classic competitors because she is “not too intellectual, not too biased, not too complicated, not too descriptive, not too long, not too ambitious, not too theoretical, not too feminine, not too topical” (qtd. in Merrill 97). Bargainnier mentions that Francis Wyndham resorted to mathematical vocabulary to describe Christie’s work, coming up with the term “animated algebra”: “Agatha Christie writes animated algebra. She dares us to solve a basic equation buried beneath a proliferation of irrelevancies” (qtd. in Bargainnier 5). So, her mysteries are usually rather simple and clues are disseminated throughout the book, but she manages to mask the solution so skilfully that her stories resist the ravages of time and remain appealing to the readers almost a century after being written.

## 2. Murder Methods in Christie's Mystery Novels

Arsenic, sandbag, cyanide, pistol, foxglove, knife, water, thallium, even nicotine and a ukulele string... What all those things have in common is that they were all used as a murder weapon by Agatha Christie. While the majority of Christie's novels features deaths related to poison, in most of her short stories the characters are not murdered in that manner. In spite of her preference for poison when murdering her victims, she also used a large variety of other weapons, knowing that using solely poisons would be too repetitive: "They can't be poisoned every time but I am happier when they are" (qtd. in Ait Abdelmalek). Wu states that Christie's two favourite murder weapons are primitive ones – poison and dagger (6). Berezow mentions seven most common homicide methods in 2016, listed by WISQARS (Web-based Injury Statistics Query and Reporting System): death caused by firearms, cutting/piercing, suffocation, striking, poisoning, fire/burning, and drowning. Agatha Christie used all of those and many more to end the lives of her characters, which confirms her versatility as an author. When an author opts for a certain method, they need to know precisely how it works not to make logical or factual blunders, which is what Christie always managed to avoid. Twilley points out that in some of her works she explained the circumstances of the victim's death so well that she was accused of offering a handbook for potential murderers. Her proficiency is especially seen when dealing with poison. Allegedly, she once said "Give me a decent bottle of poison, and I'll construct the perfect crime" (qtd. in Twilley).

### 2.1. The Use of Poison as a Killing Method

As Christie herself stated, poison was her favourite murder method: "Poison has a certain appeal ... It has not the crudeness of the revolver bullet or the blunt weapon" (*Mirrors* 178). Out of her sixty-six novels, forty-one included a murder, attempted murder or suicide in which a poison was involved (Bonow Bardell 13). She said: "I know nothing about pistols and revolvers, which is why I usually kill off my characters with a blunt instrument or better with poisons. Besides, poisons are neat and clean and really exciting..." (qtd. in Havlíčková 17). Christie is praised for her usage of poison since her murders are not only accurate but also described in everyday language, which makes them equally understandable to experts in toxicology and complete laymen (Harkup 10).

A novel widely praised for its application and description of poison is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. "In none of her other 'poison' novels and stories does she include as much

information concerning the toxic agent as she does in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*” (Bonow Bardell 16). That should not come as a surprise because this was her debut novel, which she began writing in 1916 and published in 1920, so she had plenty of time to perfect the most intricate details of the circumstances of Mrs Inglethorp’s death. Furthermore, that was the period in which Christie volunteered as a nurse and as a chemist’s assistant, working with poisons immediately, so she was able to channel that knowledge into the plot. Interestingly, this novel introduces the character of Cynthia Murdoch, who also works as a chemist’s assistant, possibly a result of Christie’s real life experience.

Mrs Emily Inglethorp was a wealthy aged woman. She had recently married a younger man, Alfred Inglethorp, whom Emily’s family did not approve of, considering him to be too odd and a gold digger. She lived at Styles Court, which she inherited from her deceased husband and her stepsons’ father, with her new husband, her stepsons, John and Lawrence Cavendish, her daughter-in-law, Mary, her companion, Evelyn Howard, her protégée, Cynthia Murdoch, and an army of servants. Not long after the remarriage, Mrs Inglethorp suffered some kind of a seizure: “Mrs Inglethorp was lying on the bed, her whole form agitated by violent convulsions, in one of which she must have overturned the table beside her. As we entered, however, her limbs relaxed, and she fell back upon the pillows” (*Styles* 46). She continued to convolute in pain and, with every form of help being in vain, she soon died. The doctors realized that her convulsions were too “peculiar” and “tetanic” (*Styles* 49-50) to be a result of something natural, and required a post-mortem. The results confirmed Captain Hastings’ (who also witnessed Mrs Emily’s death) beliefs – she was poisoned. The fatal poison was strychnine, “one of the most deadly poisons known to mankind” (*Styles* 86). Back at the time, acquiring strychnine was not very uncommon and anyone could obtain it, and Cynthia, who worked in a dispensary, had direct access to it.

Poirot started working on the case. He revealed that in case of Mrs Inglethorp’s death, her heir was set to be Alfred. However, she was prone to changing her will quite often, constantly making different people her heirs. With Alfred being the current beneficiary, he became the number one suspect. Also, he was absent the night of his wife’s death, which made him look even more suspicious. However, some pieces of evidence emerged that exonerated Alfred and incriminated John. While the trial of John Cavendish was ongoing, Poirot kept investigating, seeing that some pieces of the puzzle just do not fit. His first impression and intuition did not fail him – he realized that Alfred was indeed the one responsible for his wife’s death, but with the help of his alleged cousin and Emily’s confidante, Miss Howard. With the help of a pharmacy

textbook and his friend Hastings, Poirot succeeds in reconstructing the chain of events that led to Mrs Emily's death.

Mrs. Inglethorp had trouble sleeping. She would pick up a sleeping tonic, which contained harmless amount of strychnine, every two weeks. Also, on some occasions, she would take some sleeping powder (i.e. potassium bromide). In large amounts, mixing potassium bromide with sleeping tonic would cause strychnine from the tonic to crystallize at the bottom of the tonic bottle. If the bottle is not shaken regularly (which was ensured by Miss Howard), the last dose of tonic from the bottle would contain a lethal amount of strychnine (*Styles* 312-313; Roth). Miss Howard was well aware of how long it took Mrs Emily to finish a bottle of tonic, so she was able to pinpoint the exact day in which she would take the last dose, and therefore prepare an alibi for both her and her cousin/lover, but also to plant some clues that would incriminate John Cavendish. They did not count on the possibility that Mrs Emily would miss a day and take the lethal dose a day after, which made their alibis rocky and easier for Poirot to crack.

Perhaps one of the most unusual Christie's books, especially when it comes to the concept of time, is *Five Little Pigs*. This book is widely praised for its accuracy and detailed plot. "The symptoms, availability and detection of the poisons contributed clues and plot to her stories. For example, the brilliantly plotted novel *Five Little Pigs* makes use of hemlock – the way it acts on the body, its taste, and the time it takes to act all match perfectly with the timeline of the novel" (Harkup 16). Another title of this novel is *Murder in Retrospect*, since it deals with the investigation of a murder that happened sixteen years ago. Poirot is approached by Carla Lemarchant, a 21-year-old woman whose mother Caroline was accused of killing her husband, the famous painter Amyas Crale, sixteen years ago. He was sitting in his garden, painting Miss Greer. His wife came, poured him a glass of beer, which he drank, and complained of the taste saying "Everything tastes foul today" (*Pigs* ch. 9). Soon after, everyone but Amyas went back to the house for lunch. He stayed there to paint, and was found dead some time later. He was sprawled on the bench, stiffened and with his eyes opened. He was poisoned with coniine, a type of toxin extracted from spotted hemlock for which there is no antidote. It paralyzed him, but he felt no pain while dying. The doctor believed that it took the poison two or three hours to kill him (*Pigs* ch. 3).

Everyone immediately figured it was Caroline who poisoned Amyas because they seemed not to be getting along very well prior to his death, but also because there was a bottle

with coniine in her bedroom. Also, Caroline did not try to defend herself during the trial, which assured everyone that she killed her husband. After being convicted, Caroline left a letter to Carla in which she stated her innocence and died soon after, so now Carla wants to clean her mother's name and find the true killer. If her mother is not guilty, one of the five people who were at the Crale estate at the time of Amyas's death must be. Poirot accepts to investigate the case and contacts every bureaucrat included in the case. After collecting legal information from them, he proceeds to talk to the potential perpetrators: Amyas' best friend and stockbroker Phillip Blake, his brother and amateur herbalist Meredith Blake, the victim's lover Elsa Greer, Caroline's disfigured stepsister Angela Warren and her governess Cecilia Williams. Poirot speaks to each of them individually and asks them to write down their own version of events. After receiving the stories, he realizes that each interviewee had a secret and a motive to kill Amyas. He puts a special emphasis on understanding the personality of someone as controversial as Amyas. In order to fill in the missing parts, he visits the five accused once more to ask each of them one more question. Finally, he makes a conclusion.

Caroline's odd behaviour during the trial was a result of her trying to protect her sister. She saw Angela tampering with the beer bottle and when she saw that Amyas died, she believed that it was Angela's beer that killed him. That is why she wiped Angela's fingerprints off the bottle and tried to plant Amyas's, but unsuccessfully. Miss Williams witnessed that incriminating situation. However, what Caroline did not understand was that the poison was in the glass, not in the beer bottle. "She, who is supposed to have poisoned her husband, didn't know how he had been poisoned. She thought the poison was in the bottle" (*Pigs* ch. 9). That meant that Angela did not poison Amyas, but someone else. It was Elsa Greer. She was disappointed that Amyas was not going to leave Caroline and marry her. She saw Caroline, who wanted to kill herself, take some coniine from Meredith the day before, took it from her bedroom and put it in Amyas's glass. It was a lucky coincidence for her that Caroline saw Angela messing with the beer. What Angela put inside was valerian. Valerian is not poisonous, but it has an unpleasant taste and Angela put it in Amyas's beer as a prank. His remark about everything tasting foul that day meant that he had already drunk something before the beer with valerian inside and that something was beer poisoned with coniine, planted there by Elsa Greer.

Poisoned alcohol was obviously cherished by Christie, since her victims in *Sparkling Cyanide* die a similar death as Amyas Crale in *Five Little Pigs*. As the title suggests, in *Sparkling Cyanide* Christie resorted to potassium cyanide to kill Rosemary and George Barton, spouses. Rosemary died first. During her birthday party at Luxembourg, a high-end restaurant, she drank

a glass of champagne with potassium cyanide in it and “sprawled forward on the table, her face blue and convulsed” (*Cyanide* 46) almost immediately. Harkup states that Christie made a slight error here because the corpses of those killed with cyanide “range from flushed to ashen, though not blue” (86). According to Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, potassium cyanide is a very aggressive poison that interferes with the ability of organs to obtain oxygen, which leads to a very quick, painful, and ugly death. Her death was considered to be a suicide, and the motive was said to be “depression after influenza” (*Cyanide* 17). Also, cyanide is a very common poison and the Bartons had it in stock on their property, since one of its many uses is killing wasps and Rosemary could take some of it at any time. Nevertheless, no one was really assured that this lively young woman would kill herself. After George received two letters stating that his wife was murdered, he decided to find out who killed her by gathering the same people who were at Luxembourg that night once more and set the murderer up, because he knew that only someone from that table was able to give Rosemary cyanide. Apart from Rosemary and him, five more people were present at the dinner: Iris Marle, Rosemary’s younger sister who inherited Rosemary’s wealth after her death; Anthony Browne, an undercover policeman who was using an alias, but Rosemary found out his real name; Stephen Farraday, a rising politician and Rosemary’s ex-lover who wanted to end their relationship so as not to endanger his marriage and political career; Alexandra (Sandra) Farraday, Stephen’s wife who was silently aware of her husband’s infidelity; Ruth Lessing, George’s secretary who was secretly in love with him. Obviously, each of them had some motive to want Rosemary dead, and each of them had a secret they wanted to keep.

However, before George could discover anything, he was murdered in the same manner, which finally encouraged the police to accept both Rosemary’s and George’s deaths as homicides. After talking to the suspects and the witnesses, Browne, Chief Inspector Kemp, and Colonel Race concluded that Ruth Lessing was responsible for their deaths, and that she collaborated with Rosemary’s cousin, Victor Drake, to kill her. The other person to die was not supposed to be George, but Iris. Ruth planted a paper packet in her purse, just like she did with Rosemary a year before, to make it look like a suicide. While everyone was dancing, Victor, who was sitting at a table right next to theirs, came disguised and put cyanide in Iris’s glass, but George mistook her glass for his own, drank the poisoned champagne and died. After that, Miss Lessing continued to try against Iris’s life. She tried to run her over and to kill her by knocking her out and placing her face on a wide open gas jet, but Browne saved her. They both had strong motives. As Browne said to Iris, “Victor certainly did it for money. Ruth partly for money, partly



for Victor, and partly, I think, because she hated Rosemary” (*Cyanide* 332-333). With Iris dead, all of the money she inherited from Rosemary would go to their aunt, Victor's mother, and as for Ruth, she killed Rosemary because of her love for George, but later fell in love with Victor and decided to help him obtain Iris's money.

### **2.1.1. Christie's Background in Chemistry**

The onset of World War I marked the beginning of Christie's enthusiasm for poisons. She volunteered to work as a nurse in a hospital in her hometown of Torquay, but soon she took some examinations and qualified for an apothecary assistant, a job that required a lot of caution while preparing drugs by hand. That enabled her to have a more direct contact with potentially dangerous chemical substances. In no time, she mastered the intricacies of the trade enough to be able to overturn her mentor's incorrect decisions. She started incorporating the knowledge she accumulated into her novels right away, so her first novel, *A Mysterious Affair at Styles*, featured a murder committed with strychnine (Harkup 9-13). Regarding the novel, she said: “Surrounded by poisons I suppose it was natural I should use poison as the murderer's weapon in my very first book” (qtd. in Sellick 1). When the novel saw the light of day in 1920, it caught not only the attention of the readers and literary critics, but of pharmaceutical community as well. The death of Mrs. Inglethorp and the features of strychnine were described so well that she received praise from pharmacists for her factual correctness (Harkup 12-13). The popularity of her first novel and the positive reviews caused by her description of the use of strychnine prompted her to use it in eleven more of her novels and stories (Bonow Bardell 17).

Simultaneously with her literary career, she kept conducting thorough research on drugs and poisons to be able to use them in her novels without making logical errors. She was in touch with many experts, asking them about substances and their properties. During World War II, she volunteered yet again to work in a dispensary to expand her knowledge, this time in London. She would work there almost every day (except on Sundays), yet she managed to be extremely prolific during that period, writing twelve novels for the duration of the war. Another perk of her lifelong research is that she learned so much about so many poisons that she was comfortable using such a wide array of them properly, so she would rarely repeat the same toxins. Apart from the aforementioned strychnine, arsenic is the poison that people associate the most with Christie, but actually she used it only eight times (four times in novels and four in short stories), which, compared to more than 300 of her victims, is a small proportion. She even came up with her own

poisons, e.g. Serenite, Benvo, and Calmo, but only one fabricated poison was the murder weapon (Harkup 13-19). Her use of poisons was at such a high level that those dealing with the poisoned would remember reading her books and link the symptoms to certain poisons, thus saving lives. A very well-known example of that is her 1961 novel *The Pale Horse*, in which she described thallium poisoning. In 1971, the police were able to catch a serial killer who poisoned his victims with thallium. A doctor who had read the novel saw the connection between the poisonings in a factory in London and the book and identified Graham Young, a worker at the factory, as the culprit. Also, in 1977 in London, a year after Christie's death, doctors were unable to set the diagnosis for a girl suffering from a serious illness, but one of the nurses saw the similarities between the girl's symptoms and the symptoms of a victim from the novel, and the girl was indeed soon diagnosed with and treated for thallium poisoning (Lennartson 610; Aronson).

## **2.2. Non-chemical Death Causes**

Despite poisons being Christie's favourite and most frequent method of killing her characters, there is still a significant number of her novels in which she does not use toxins to murder her victims. One of the most famous novels of that kind is *Murder on the Orient Express*. Mr Ratchett/Cassetti, the man whose murder Poirot is investigating in this book, used to be an extremely despicable criminal back in the USA, who escaped after kidnapping and killing Daisy Armstrong, a three-year-old girl. He is soon hunted down by friends and family of the Armstrongs and killed in a train department in an especially unconventional manner. One morning, he is found dead after being inflicted twelve knife wounds. With the help of Monsieur Bouc and Dr Constantine, Poirot manages to conclude that the murder was conducted by twelve passengers of the Orient Express, all of which were in a way connected to the afflicted family and cared for them enough to kill Ratchett. Since Ratchett managed to escape before being caught and tried for his acts, the twelve perpetrators decided to take the matter into their own hands and become a special "jury." Each of them (with the exception of Countess Andrenyi, who was replaced by her husband) entered his compartment and inflicted one stab wound. That way no one could know whose stab was the lethal one, so they were all able to share the blame.

However, two events messed up their plans. First, the train got snowed up. That way they could not blame it on someone who left the train at some station. "It would be put down as an outside job, and the 'small dark man with the womanish voice' would actually have been seen by one or more of the passengers leaving the train at Brod" (*Orient Express* 340). The second thing

they did not count on was encountering Poirot on the Orient Express. During that time, there was a conception that Yugoslav police was incompetent, so they believed that the police would accept their explanation about the small dark man with a high-pitched voice and leave the matter as it is, allowing all of them to go under the radar. This unusual death with twelve murderers is somewhat different than other Christie's deaths, who avoided gore as often as possible. Christie's preference for poisons was, among other reasons, a way to kill her victims in a dignified and humane manner. However, since Ratchett was an exceptionally vile person, such solution seems highly appropriate. Because of his nature, Poirot does something he usually never would – he decides not to turn in “the members of the jury” and keep the truth he discovered only between the passengers on the train.

As opposed to *Murder on the Orient Express*, which features only one murder, in *Cat Among the Pigeons*, Poirot investigates three violent deaths. Throughout the novel, three teachers of Meadowbank School are brutally killed. The first one to breathe her last is Grace Springer, sports teacher. Her lifeless body is found in the sports pavilion by two other employees of the school, Miss Johnson and Miss Chadwick. The cause of her death is a gunshot wound: “‘She was shot from about four feet away,’ he said. ‘Bullet penetrated the heart. Death must have been pretty well instantaneous’” (*Cat* ch. 8). Soon after, another murder in the sports pavilion shocks the boarding school. This time, the victim is Eleanor Vansittart, the most prominent pretender to the post of the headmistress after Miss Bulstrode's retirement. The circumstances of her death are rather similar to the death of Miss Springer since they were both killed in the gymnasium at night and found by Miss Chadwick: “It was, Kelsey thought, like a bad dream repeating itself, as he entered the brilliantly lighted Sports Pavilion. There, once again, was a body with the doctor kneeling beside it. Once again the doctor rose from his knees and got up” (*Cat* ch. 15). However, in the case of Vansittart's death, the murder weapon is different: “Slugged on the back of the head, this time. Might have been a cosh or a sandbag. Something of that kind” (*Cat* ch. 15). It is later revealed that the killer used a sandbag to commit the killing.

Before anyone could recover from the shock of two murders at Meadowbank, another death of a teacher took place. This time the unfortunate woman was Miss Blanche, French teacher. Just like Miss Vansittart, Miss Blanche was killed with a sandbag: “The coat on the chair seemed to gather itself together, drop to the ground and in an instant behind Mademoiselle Blanche a hand with a sandbag rose and, as she opened her lips to scream, fell, dully, on the back of her neck” (*Cat* ch. 21). The killer of Miss Springer and Mademoiselle Blanche is revealed to be Ann Shapland, who got a job in Meadowbank as a secretary after she saw that the royal

jewels she was after were brought to the school. Her aim was to retrieve them, so she went to the gymnasium where the tennis racquet containing the jewels was stored, but she was interrupted by Miss Springer. Mademoiselle Blanche somehow knew what Ann did, so she decided to blackmail her, which got her killed as well. When her identity was revealed in front of the entire school staff, Ann Shapland tried to shoot Miss Bulstrode, the headmistress, but shot Miss Chadwick instead, who leaped in front of Miss Bulstrode to save her life. Miss Vansittart, on the other hand, was killed by Miss Chadwick, who was jealous when Miss Bulstrode insinuated that she would appoint Miss Vansittart the headmistress once she retires. Poirot claims that she was so obsessed with Meadowbank that she thought that killing Miss Vansittart would be convenient for her and that her murder would be pinned to the author of Miss Springer's death. Also, Shapland wanted to link the third murder to the second one by using the same weapon: "For one thing, she could not risk a pistol shot in the school building, and for another she is a very clever young woman. She wanted to tie up this third murder with the second one, for which she had an alibi" (*Cat* ch. 24).

Another murder method in Christie's arsenal is drowning, featured in her short story "Death by Drowning." Though not very popular, this story is unusual because of murder by drowning, uncommon for Christie (she also uses drowning to kill Ipy in *Death Comes as the End*). When Rose Emmott, a pregnant local girl from St. Mary Mead drowns in a river, everyone believes it is a suicide, but not Miss Marple. She approaches Henry Clithering, her acquaintance, who she believes has enough power to make the police look into the case a bit more closely, and hands him a piece of paper on which she wrote the name of the person whom she suspects to be Rose's killer. Clithering goes to the station, and without mentioning his encounter with Miss Marple, he is informed by Colonel Melchett and Inspector Drewitt that Rose's death was indeed a murder – during autopsy, bruise marks were found on her biceps, indicating that she was pushed off a bridge. The three men go on to interrogate the three suspects – Rex Sandford, an architect from London who got Rose pregnant despite having a fiancée back home and who is considered to be the murderer by both the villagers and the police, Tom Emmott, father of the deceased, strict and impulsive, dissatisfied with his daughter's pregnancy, and Joe Ellis, loyal but hurting ex-boyfriend who lives with a middle-aged widow, Mrs Bartlett, who provides an alibi for Joe.

Melchett and Drewitt are still convinced that Sandford is guilty, which is supported by him not having an alibi and by writing a note to Rose, asking her to meet him at the bridge at the time of the murder, but Clithering does not share the same opinion. He asks to see the boy who

witnessed Rose's death and then goes back to Miss Marple, whose couple of sentences shed new light on the case. Being sure that the name on the paper is the right one, he goes to Ellis and identifies his landlady as the killer, and then retells how it all went down. Mrs Bartlett thought that Rose was "flighty" and "a bad lot" ("Drowning" 308), but knew that Joe was still in love with her and that he would take her back despite the pregnancy now that she was abandoned by Sandford. Since she herself was in love with Joe, she decided that she would not let that happen, and when she ran into Rose on the bridge while taking the laundry home, she pushed her off the bridge. When she got home, she pretended that she wanted to give Joe an alibi by saying that she was with him the whole evening, but instead, that alibi was meant to protect her.

### 3. Hercule Poirot

Hercule Poirot is Christie's best-known detective. Of Belgian origin, he is a retired police officer who moved to England after World War I, where he began his career as a detective and an investigator (Havlíčková 38). He first appeared in Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in 1920. Although he was “born old” (Maida and Spornick 86), already aged around seventy in his first appearance, Christie soon recognized his value and decided to stick to him (Havlíčková 38). She continued using him throughout her entire career and developed him to be one of the most famous literary characters in the world. He appeared in a total of thirty-three novels and sixty-five short stories (Xu 96). Christie's last novel featuring Poirot, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, was published in 1975. By that time, his popularity was so immense that his death was honoured by an obituary, which was posted in *New York Times* on 6 August 1975, thus becoming the only fictional character to ever receive one (Havlíčková 38; Sellick 8-9). Many of Christie's works featuring Poirot were subsequently made into films, plays, television series, etc. and some remarkable actors who portrayed him, such as David Suchet, Peter Ustinov, and Albert Finney, helped build the persona of Hercule Poirot still recognizable all around the globe.

#### 3.1. Physical Appearance and Personality Traits

One of the best and most concise descriptions of Poirot originates from the first time he is introduced in Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, and it is uttered by his faithful companion in some of his earlier cases, best friend and the narrator of the novel, Captain Arthur Hastings:

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. (*Styles* 35)

This description clearly shows that Poirot is an example of an eccentric, well-organized, and pedantic person. To him, the best compliment a person can get is that they are systematic: “A ‘man of method’ was, in Poirot's estimation, the highest praise that could be bestowed on any individual” (*Styles* 90). He is extremely finicky, which amuses Hastings: “John flung the match into an adjacent flower bed, a proceeding which was too much for Poirot's feelings. He retrieved

it, and buried it neatly” (*Styles* 64). He is obsessed with neatness, symmetry, order and method, which is why he is always straightening or fixing things around him, feeling restless if something is out of line (Blöndal 14). His meticulousness goes to such extent that it even led some critics to believe that he suffers from obsessive-compulsive disorder. Gualtieri argues that, just like Adrian Monk, Poirot also shows overt symptoms of OCD (22), exemplifying it by stating that “he was uncomfortable if his bank balance wasn’t exactly 444 pounds, 44 shillings and 4 pence” (19).

In accordance with his neatness, Poirot pays close attention to fashion and his physical appearance. He is proud of his enormous moustache, which he keeps impeccable at all times, and is always dressed elegantly: “Hercule Poirot, despite his small figure and funny head, likes the fashion. He is always neatly dressed in the finest of clothing that is always elegant and immaculately clean” (Havlíčková 41). Considering his complete appearance and behaviour (his moustache, height, shape of his head, fastidiousness etc.), one cannot overlook the fact that he is depicted very comically, as if he was meant to be a target of mockery. Bargainnier says that this was Christie's way of introducing just the right amount of comedy in otherwise serious mystery works: “[He is] comic both in presentation and conversation, whereas [his] actions are serious” (11). Be that as it may, he is still a very vain and self-assured person, aware of his abilities and revelling in his own undisputable achievements: “My name is Hercule Poirot,... and I am probably the greatest detective in the world” (Christie qtd. in Bargainnier 48). Due to his abilities, he becomes renowned and so successful that he can afford declining cases and accepting only those he finds intriguing enough, which feeds his vanity. Havlíčková states that he likes being praised by others as well and that it satisfies his ego when people mention that he is famous, ingenious, and clever (42).

Eventually, Poirot became unbearable for Christie herself. After Poirot’s initial success, during which period she wrote over twenty novels and stories featuring him, she grew so tired of him by the end of the 1930s that she wanted to kill him. She even regretted creating him, saying “Why did I ever invent this detestable, bombastic, tiresome little creature? ... eternally straightening things, eternally boasting, eternally twirling his moustache and tilting his egg-shaped head” (Christie qtd. in Bargainnier 45). However, she was aware that she owed a big portion of her fame to him and that killing him so early would cause an outcry by the readers, resulting in her downfall, so she decided to postpone his death (Bargainnier 45-46). Nevertheless, during the period in which she was fed up with him, she wrote *Curtain*, the book in which he dies, but decided to leave it unpublished until 1975 (Sellick 8). If she had killed him like Sir Arthur Conan Doyle did with his most famous detective, Sherlock Holmes, perhaps she

would not have achieved the cult status she achieved largely due to the character of Hercule Poirot.

So, if he has so many negative traits, why do people still like him so much? Bargainnier asserts that “though such vanity may be tiresome to some readers, most enjoy it as another example of his comic foreignness, another endearing eccentricity” (49), while Maida and Spornick claim that his looks, mannerisms, and eccentric behaviour make him who he is, distinguish him from other detectives and make him memorable: “Poirot became ‘a person’ fleshed out in temper tantrums, his flights of fancy, his compassion, his flair for the dramatic. And readers came to respect him” (104). Also, his consistence, neatness, and systematicness assure the reader that there is no room for mistake, forming the illusion of control in a chaotic environment caused by the crime he is trying to solve. Due to his desire to be in complete control of every single detail, he is able to spot even the smallest irregularities, making him infallible and always one step in front of others. For instance, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Hastings knew that Dr Bauerstein was at Styles the night of the murder, a detail that he deemed irrelevant and forgot to mention to Poirot, but it later turned out to be of extreme importance: “Coffee had been brought in for seven persons, not six, for Dr Bauerstein had been there that evening. This changed the face of the whole affair, for there was now one cup missing” (*Styles* 308). Poirot is so brilliant in his approach and confident about his abilities that this separates him from other literary heroes, who are almost never vain and rarely accept praise from others, let alone praise themselves. He does it with pleasure, which makes him authentic and special. Despite disliking him herself and being aware of his flaws and annoying characteristics from early on, Christie knew that changing Poirot was not an option as they make him who he is, which is why she decided to keep Poirot’s personality intact.

### **3.2. Psychology and “Little Grey Cells”**

As a man of great experience from his previous career, Poirot is familiar with a number of methods of discovering criminals. Bargainnier states Poirot’s methods of detection to be psychology and order and method, and Havlíčková adds logic, sense, knowledge, feelings, and psychological examination of the suspects. Just like Christie does not change Poirot’s personality over time, she does not change his investigation methods as well. He always considers psychology to be crucial while solving a crime, even more relevant than clues themselves, because all crimes are psychological and it is what lies behind the act that will help him



determine the perpetrator (Bargainnier 59-60; Havlíčková 43). “In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Poirot made the most of tangible clues in solving the mystery. Gradually in the later novels and stories he speaks more and more of the ‘psychology of the murderer’ and also of the victim” (Bunson 75). Also, as mentioned above, he sees importance in details that others would consider insignificant. He searches for clues while watching others and listening to their conversations and gossips, knowing that a person lying cannot do it all the time – sooner or later, some illogicality will emerge, and he will be there to notice it.

Yet, the method he is most proud of are his “little grey cells.” He considers them to be his biggest forte: “[‘]This affair must all be unravelled from within.’ He tapped his forehead. ‘These little grey cells. It is ‘up to them’—as you say over here’” (*Styles* 257-258). They are one of his most prominent characteristics and Christie came up with that term even before she devised his name: “And he should be very brainy—he should have little grey cells of the mind—that was a good phrase: I must remember that—yes, he would have little grey cells” (*Autobiography* ch. 5, location 4482). He relies on them more than on anything else, claiming them to be more relevant than collected clues. “Poirot affirms more than once that he can come nearer to the solution of any problem by lying back in an armchair and using the little grey cells than by sniffing the ground in search of tangible clues” (Bunson 75). He insisted that “the secret of detection was to use what . . . he called ‘the little grey cells.’ You can’t collect your evidence before you begin thinking, he meant: because thinking means asking questions” (Collingwood qtd. in Bargainnier 60). His brain is trained so well that his cells became infallible. Campbell reminds that Poirot’s little grey cells failed him completely (only) once. While he was still a beginner in the Belgian police, he failed to apprehend the relevance of a blue lid on a pink box. That instance keeps haunting him all his life (Campbell ch. 4).

A novel where those methods come to prominence really well is *Five Little Pigs*. The alternative title of this book is *Murder in Retrospect*, which already suggests that this novel is rather different from other Christie’s novels, especially regarding the aspect of time. Poirot is required to solve the mystery of the case that happened sixteen years ago, and, obviously, he is unable to go around, take a look at the murder scene, and find physical evidence like he usually does. Therefore, he is obliged to resort only to thorough thinking, scrutinizing other people’s testimonies, and finding irregularities in their statements. However, he knows that that is more than enough: ““One does not, you know, employ merely the muscles. I do not need to bend and measure the footprints and pick up the cigarette ends and examine the bent blades of grass. It is enough for me to sit back in my chair and think. It is this’ – he tapped his eggshaped head – ‘this,

that functions!’” (*Pigs* ch. 1). The woman who asked him to solve the murder knows that it will be a gritty toil, considering the circumstances, and that for many detectives finding a solution would be impossible, but she is convinced that Poirot’s famous abilities will help her find the truth.

I’ve heard about you . . . The things you’ve done. The way you have done them. It’s psychology that interests you, isn’t it? Well, that doesn’t change with time. The tangible things are gone – the cigarette end and the footprints and the bent blades of grass. You can’t look for those any more. But you can go over all the facts of the case, and perhaps talk to the people who were there at the time – they’re all alive still – and then – and then, as you said just now, you can lie back in your chair and think. (*Pigs* ch. 1)

Poirot accepts the offer, knowing that the solution is not out of his reach. Tangible clues are not crucial for him anyway. Psychology and his little grey cells are more than enough: “My success, let me tell you, has been founded on the psychology – the eternal why of human behaviour. That, Mr. Blake, is what interests the world in crime today” (*Pigs* ch. 3) and “It is proposed to rewrite the stories of certain bygone crimes – from the psychological angle. Psychology in crime, it is my specialty” (*Pigs* ch. 3). In the end, he proves that his little grey cells combined with the focus on the psychology of people suffice when he needs to solve a crime, just like Carla Lemarchant believed, and identifies the real culprit behind Amyas Crale’s death, thus clearing Caroline Crale’s name.

## 4. Jane Marple

Jane Marple is Christie's most famous female detective, but Gill goes even further and refers to her as "the world's most famous woman detective to date." She is an aged spinster who lives in the village of St. Mary Mead. Her natural curiosity led her to become an amateur investigator. She came to prominence when she appeared in Christie's 1930 novel *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the first of twelve novels in which she starred. She also solved the mystery in twenty short stories, thus becoming Christie's second most-featured character after Poirot. Xu mentions that, in her *Autobiography*, Christie claims that she did not intend to turn Miss Marple into a recurring character, but she found her persona pleasing and decided to keep writing about her. When she first appeared, she was already aged between sixty-five and seventy (Xu 97-98), but that did not stop her from solving mysteries for more than four decades. Her last case, *The Sleeping Murder*, came out in 1976, even though it was written during World War II. Instead of killing Miss Marple, like she did with Poirot, Christie decided to retire her. Havlíčková asserts that the Marple cases are the proper examples of cosy mysteries (18). Apart from the novels and short stories in which she stars, her character remains alive through stage adaptations, movies and television series as well. She has been embodied by a series of outstanding actresses, most notable being Angela Lansbury, Margaret Rutherford, Geraldine McEwan, and Joan Hickson.

### 4.1. Looks and Personality Characteristics

Prior to Christie, not many mystery authors dared to use a woman as the protagonist and main investigator in their works, let alone make it an amateur spinster seemingly affected by senescence. She may look very old, but she is still as sharp as a whip:

Because she is gentle, elderly and very proper, Marple does not seem to pose a threat to anyone. In fact people tend to overlook her – at first. But they are soon brought up short, for this Victorian spinster is a powerhouse. Her deceptive appearance and lulling naiveté disarm criminals (and readers), who are caught off guard until they feel the cool steel beneath that fleecy wool. (Maida and Spornick 108)

Judging from Miss Marple's appearance, no one would ever suspect that this old lady, who at first resembles a typical rural grandmother in both looks and behaviour, is in fact an amateur detective who investigates murders. Her innocent demeanour helps her to get people to form a wrong first impression, often not taking her seriously, which she can easily turn into an advantage later. This is how Inspector Craddock from *A Murder Is Announced* sees her: "She

was far more benignant than he had imagined and a good deal older. She seemed indeed very old. She had snow-white hair and a pink crinkled face and very soft innocent blue eyes, and she was heavily enmeshed in fleecy wool. Wool round her shoulders in the form of a lacy cape and wool that she was knitting and which turned out to be a baby's shawl" (*Announced* ch. 8). At first sight, she seems harmless, partly because she engages in activities typical for a stereotypical rural old woman, such as knitting, gardening, and gossiping, but behind that facade hides a strong and insightful woman who carefully observes the events in her surroundings and uses her life experience, as well as her intuition, to identify the perpetrator. "In appearance, Miss Marple is a tall thin woman with a pink, wrinkled face, pale blue eyes and snowy white hair which she piles upon her head in an old-fashioned manner. Her plain appearances, gossiping conversation and ever-lasting knitting needles often mislead people to underestimating her as simply a curious old maid" (Xu 97). However, Marple was not created a dear, amiable old lady. Xu reminds that in *The Murder at the Vicarage* she is a sharp-tongued gossip who uses her gardening to inspect on her neighbours and is even referred to as "a nasty old cat." Nonetheless, with time her personality changes and she really becomes nice and gentle like she used to pretend she was, and her gardening becomes a real hobby instead of a way to spy on others (Xu 98).

Born in the 1850s, Miss Marple is fond of tradition and reminiscent of the old days, in whom "Christie managed to capture ... the final life spark of a dying generation" (Maida and Spornick 108) – "Miss Marple fondly remembers the days when parlourmaids used a brush and dustpan instead of 'a virulent Hoover' with which the lady from the Development fills the cottage with noise each morning" (Zemboy 335). She misses having someone by her side who has been there for her since her youth, and recognizes the pain brought by loneliness: "I have nephews and nieces and kind friends – but there's no one who knew me as a young girl – no one who belongs to the old days. I've been alone for quite a long time now" (*Announced* ch. 17). Although she never got married, she is aware of the importance of kin, and to avoid loneliness to strike her even harder, she tries to nurture a warm relationship with her family: "Now I like to keep all the pictures of my nephews and nieces as babies – and then as children – and so on" (*Announced* ch. 8). She is especially close to her nephew, famous author Raymond West, who even appears in some of Marple novels and aids her financially. Although she spends most of her time in St. Mary Mead and rarely leaves England, she likes to travel and visit her friends in spite of her advanced age (like she does in e.g. *A Murder Is Announced* and *The Moving Finger*). "Seemingly fragile and often enfeebled, she jaunts about with great energy" (Maida and

Spornick 108). In *A Caribbean Mystery*, she even travels to the Caribbean after an illness for a vacation, where she encounters and solves three murder cases.

Although there were some speculations that the character of Miss Marple was based on Christie's grandmother, the author dismissed the allegations by stating "Miss Marple was not in any way a picture of my grandmother; she was far more fussy and spinsterish than my grandmother ever was" (*Autobiography* ch. 9, location 7670). Christie rather believes to have modelled her after some of her grandmother's friends. However, she says that there is one thing Marple shares with her grandmother – "though a cheerful person, she always expected the worst of everyone and everything, and was, with almost frightening accuracy, usually proved right" (*Autobiography* ch. 9, location 7674).

Some critics seem to be unable to agree whether Miss Marple is a feminist figure or not. Vipond posits that Miss Marple is not a very empowering figure, mentioning that Christie was very traditional gender-wise, and her female characters' "main mental capacity seems to be intuitive; even Miss Marple, who is praised by her distinguished male admirers like Sir Henry Clithering for her wonderfully (and surprisingly) logical brain, is so discursive in speech that it seems unbelievable that she can think straight" (10). Devereux claims that, although very successful, she is mostly passive and self-deprecating: "She does little to challenge gender boundaries and instead revels in her Victorian upbringing" (19). On the other hand, McPeters praises her abilities, arguing that she uses feminized discourse, i.e. gossip, to solve murder cases: "In signifying the success of feminized discourse in solving murder cases that male characters are unable to settle when relying on conventional and formal rhetorical modes, Christie contradicts established rhetorical standards, and Marple reveals a feminist focus, successfully utilizing avenues of communication associated with women" (3). Köseoğlu further asserts that by creating Miss Marple and giving her the ability to compete with and even be better than specialized male investigators, she enhances the position of women in the male-dominated society and breaks the prejudices present in the patriarchal society that women cannot investigate and be rational (134-136). Lastly, Bolin affirms that Miss Marple is indeed a feminist figure, stating that she assisted in the feminization of crime and that "Miss Marple mysteries are ones in which female news and knowledge are vindicated, throwing a smiling side eye at mansplanations and male authorities."

## 4.2. Investigation Based on Intuition

Even at first sight, Miss Marple novels are much more different than Poirot's. The first thing that confirms this is that Miss Marple almost always appears rather late. In *The Moving Finger*, she is introduced in the last third of the novel, and even then she is hardly ever mentioned until the concluding pages of the book. That is why she is often not shown garnering clues and bases her investigation much more on women's intuition, or, as she likes to refer to it, "specialized knowledge" ("Drowning" 291). She "begins her investigation by looking for patterns or regularities" (Moses and Knutsen 209). Once she recognizes the pattern, she is able to find what is missing and connects the dots (Moses and Knutsen 209). She owes a lot of her success to her curiosity, large circle of friends and acquaintances, and to the life experience she gathered living in St. Mary Mead: "'I know human nature,' said Miss Marple. 'It's impossible not to know human nature living in a village all these years'" ("Drowning" 291). Since she is unobtrusive, she goes under the radar while monitoring people and events around her. Based on her observations, on the tiny details she picks up that a not so well-trained eye normally would not, and on her intuition, she succeeds in getting to the bottom of what happened. "Surveillance, coupled with her knowledge of humanity, is how she solves crimes: Marple watches people and reads them against what she knows about human nature" (Devereux 19).

Miss Marple is very suspicious, always taking what others say with a grain of salt, and not at all naïve: "Really, I have no gifts – no gifts at all – except perhaps a certain knowledge of human nature. People, I find, are apt to be far too trustful. I'm afraid that I have a tendency always to believe the worst. Not a nice trait. But so often justified by subsequent events" (*Announced* ch. 8). While solving the mysteries, she recalls some instances from her life and links them to the present case: "You displayed an absolute genius for getting to the truth. And you always instanced, I remember, some village parallel which had supplied you with the clue" ("Drowning" 289). Stewart ascribes her abilities of solving the mysteries the authorities are unable to solve to her curiosity, shrewdness and infallible memory, despite her advanced age (35). Just as she likes to ponder in peace while searching for the solution, she also tends to keep a low profile after solving the case, leaving the impression that she does not do any of it for the fame, but only for the satisfaction of obtaining justice. "Miss M's crime-solving is all mental, deduced over cups of tea. When she is proved right, and later thanked, she offers up only a smile and a simple 'Not at all...'" (O'Dell 150).

## 5. The Comparison of Christie's Two Most Famous Sleuths

To anyone who has ever read at least one Poirot and one Marple novel, it becomes clear that bringing the two of them into correlation is not an easy job. Although both very important for Christie's writing, she never wrote anything where they meet (Sellick 8). Christie gives reason for that, saying that "Poirot, a complete egoist, would not like being taught his business or having suggestions made to him by an elderly spinster lady" (*Autobiography* ch. 9, location 7637). Even though they are both very successful at what they do and at first have similar physical and social traits and investigation ways, Poirot and Marple are very different. Not only do their personalities differ, but also the way Christie uses them in her works.

First, it is important to state the proportion of Marple and Poirot works in Christie's bibliography. Paradoxically, despite preferring Marple over Poirot, Christie uses Poirot in three times as many novels and short stories as Miss Marple. The reason behind that may lie in the fact that the character of Poirot offers the possibility to development more plausible plots, since he is applicable to more situations because of his previous experience as a policeman and worldwide fame, which entails easier attainment of evidence. Marple, on the other hand, does not have the span of possibilities Poirot does, which is maybe why Christie tends to set the Marple novels in rural, non-dynamic areas where investigating becomes easier, suspects are not as numerous, and gossiping (which is very important for Miss Marple) is omnipresent.

Also, in the Poirot novels, he almost always appears at the beginning of the story (Merrill 94), whereas Marple almost always appears halfway through the book or even later (a very good example of that being *The Moving Finger*) (Xu 98). That way Poirot seems to be given greater importance in his novels than Miss Marple in hers. He is a protagonist, a character who is in the middle of everything, often in contact with the victim(s) and the suspects even before the crime happens, while Marple, despite being essential for the plot, generally leaves an impression of a secondary character who just happens to be close when the predicament happens and is asked to solve the crime by someone who knows about her expertise in crime-solving, or offers her services herself. There are still exceptions, though. There are novels in which Miss Marple is present from page one (*A Caribbean Mystery*), just like there are those where Poirot is not (*Cat Among the Pigeons*).

The frequency of appearance and the level of engagement in the novels are just a drop in the sea of things that separate the Marple and Poirot novels. To comprehend them, it is also important to touch upon the way Christie sets the mystery and to mention the process of its

solving. In the Marple novels, “there are fewer suspects and clues, as indeed there must be, given our distance from the crucial evidence, but arriving at Miss Marple’s solution is still much more difficult than arriving at Poirot’s” (Merrill 95-96). Also, in the Poirot works, the reader becomes aware of the new pieces of evidence at the same time as Poirot or right after he acquires them, whereas Miss Marple remains more mysterious, frequently withholds clues from the reader and often exposes something she knew all along in the very end (Merrill 96; Xu 99).

When it comes to the setting, Poirot stories are much more diverse. He travels quite often and solves mysteries even during transit (boat, plane, train). His novels are set all around – in villages, cities, in England, abroad (some of those locations being Egypt, Mesopotamia, the Mediterranean Sea, and even Croatia). Marple also likes to travel, but she is not that adventurous. She mostly travels to villages or small towns to see her friends. With the exception of the Caribbean and London, Marple does not travel abroad or to big cities and is mainly very local, restricted to St. Mary Mead or some other non-urban locations. Bargainnier stresses that “nearly all of the works in which she appears involve her village of St. Mary Mead to some extent, and many occur solely there” (28).

Another thing that distinguishes them is their background. Poirot is a former Belgian policeman who moved to England after his retirement and began his career as a detective, whilst Marple has no such previous experience and solves crimes as a hobby. When it comes to their investigation tactics, they start off at the same point. Both of them try to look into the psyche of the people they are dealing with and pick up subtleties potentially crucial for the case. So, psychology is number one for both of them, they just refer to it differently – Marple likes to call her approach “women’s intuition” or “specialized knowledge,” while Poirot talks about his “little grey cells.” They both like to sit back, take their time and ponder over the case. However, Poirot from here on has an easier path. What is really important is that, since Poirot is a former police officer and currently a famous professional investigator, he knows many people from the law enforcement circles and has more approach to the official clues. Marple does not have the same perks. She simply has to rely on what she hears, sees, and concludes, rarely having in her hands any physical evidence or clue.

A difference arises also in their financial position. Poirot worked his entire life, and in retirement he continued to have a source of income. That can be seen based on several facts. First, in some novels he is shown to have a secretary. That means that his business is flourishing, since he is able to pay salaries to Miss Lemon. Next, he is so famous that he can pick the cases



he wants to solve and turn down the ones he finds unappealing. Also, substantial fees are mentioned on several occasions, for example, in *Murder on the Orient Express* Ratchett promises Poirot big money in return for his services, but Poirot turns him down because he does not like him, despite the money that is offered. He confirms that money is not what he is after on various occasions, for example, in *Five Little Pigs*: “I assure you, Mr Blake, I am really interested. It is not just a matter of money with me. I genuinely want to recreate the past” (*Pigs* ch. 3). As a result of his success, he has accumulated enough money not to have financial worries. As for Miss Marple, there is not so much information available regarding her finances. It is mentioned that her successful nephew Raymond pays for her holidays and gives her money, but the exact amount is not stated. One can only speculate if it is only enough to make ends meet or whether Raymond helps his aunt with piles of money. Whatever the case may be, Poirot is much richer than Miss Marple. Gill compares not only their financial but also their social situation, arguing that “though much the poorer financially, Miss Marple is notably richer in friends than her fellow sleuth Hercule Poirot.”

That leads us to their personalities. Poirot is a vain person who often makes remarks so condescending that it offends other people, which is not a quality many people like. In his conversations with others, he rarely touches upon some personal details, which is partially a reason why he has many acquaintances but little close friends. Perhaps Hastings is the only person who Poirot can refer to as a real friend. Marple, however, is much more amiable and beloved. She wins sympathies wherever she appears because of her gentleness and humbleness, though that was not always the case. Marple undergoes a massive change after her first novel, where she was depicted as harsher and nosier (Xu 98) while, on the contrary, Poirot’s character remains unchanged (Maida and Spornick 98).

However, Poirot and Marple are not completely different, but have many resemblances as well. First and foremost, neither of them looks like a typical detective. According to Havlíčková, by creating Poirot “Agatha Christie created probably the most emasculate detective figure like a parody of typical heroic detective in terms of appearance and manners” (29). Marple is also an atypical sleuth, being so old and seemingly frail. Still, they both prove that appearances are often deceiving. Furthermore, they are both old, unmarried, single, and without proximate relatives, which makes sense because if they were created with spouses and/or someone depending on them, they would not be able to wander around and solve crimes. Another feature that they both share, but which is more present in Miss Marple, is their ability to get on with people much younger than themselves (Gill). Also, at the moment of their creation, i.e. their first appearance,

they were both already rather old. It is uncertain whether they age accordingly or if Christie decided that years would pass by slower for them. “To attempt to determine [Poirot’s] age is a waste of time. By strict chronology, assuming retirement at sixty-five, he would be over 135 by the time of *Curtain*, the last novel” (Bargainnier 45). Zembo asserts Marple’s age was specified as eighty-nine in 1957 in *What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw* (333). Knowing that she appeared in 1930 as a woman between sixty-five and seventy and that she was still investigating in *Nemesis* in 1971 means that Christie was inconsistent with her age as well.

What they also have in common is that Christie created both of them with certain weaknesses. Since their cognitive skills had to be peaking, Christie decided to make their physical appearance faulty. However, it is visible even at a glance that Christie created Poirot with more mockable elements than Marple. Bargainnier claims that Poirot’s comic image and relationships are “Christie’s principal means of preventing his infallible intellect and moral superiority from separating him totally from the humble reader” (59). The same can, but only up to a point, be said for Marple as well. Unlike Poirot, who has both a quirky behaviour (perhaps even suffers from OCD) and an unintimidating and comical body, Marple’s only flaw is that she looks really old.

Having all their similarities and differences in mind, it is important to mention their popularity with the readership. Despite having a more pleasing personality and being favoured by her creator, Miss Marple is preferred by fewer readers than Poirot. It is impossible to objectively determine why his fan base is larger than hers because every person has their own preferences in reading. However, there are some irrefutable facts that probably contribute to Poirot’s popularity: he appears in both more novels and short stories, he is more present throughout the novels he is in, his novels are much more versatile when it comes to settings, his investigation methods are somewhat more diverse, which makes the novels slightly more dynamic than Marple’s, and his unique eccentricity makes him much more memorable. Anyway, whether they are reading a Marple or a Poirot book, the readers can be certain that both of them will do their best to find the culprit because, in the end, they both share an important feature – they have a never-ending desire to find out the truth and pursue justice.

## Conclusion

In her works, Agatha Christie offers so much – unexpected pregnancies, murder announcements, poisoned beverages, twelve people killing the same person, etc. The reader never knows what to expect when opening one of her novels for the very first time. Her capability to write mystery works with such diverse plots and utterly unexpected twists make her extremely popular even a century after her first novel was published. The majority of her novels contains deaths caused by poison. She will always be remembered for their slick usage, praised even by pharmacists. Over time, her murders by poison made them her trademark. Since it was easy to plant the poison in fluids, Christie resorts to that method fairly often, which can be seen from the three analyzed novels where victims drink poisoned fluids and die. Poison is practical because it offers a more flexible timeframe – it is easy to determine when the victim was stabbed or shot and when they died, even when a certain poison got into their system, but it can become hard to establish when the poison was planted (sometimes it is even two weeks before the victim's death, like in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*), which makes it easier for the killers to form a firm alibi. Christie's aptitude for chemistry makes up for what she lacks in ballistics. Her statements regarding poisons and other weapons lead to the conclusion that she would have used poisons even more, had there not been a danger of becoming too repetitive. The fact that she puts more poison-related deaths in her novels, and more deaths caused by some other factor in her short stories, implies that she opted for the means she was fonder of in novels because they are longer and require more elaboration, and are also generally more popular than short stories.

Based on the analysis of several of Christie's works, it is to conclude that novels including poisons differ from those where there is no administering of poison in more than just the murder method. Christie pays more attention to details in the novels where there is poison, partly because she knew more about poison than any other murder method, but also because the effects of a poison require more explaining than the effects of e.g. a revolver or a dagger. Also, fewer suspects can be excluded based on their physical characteristics in novels featuring poison. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, both men and women, old and young, are equally fit to be the killer because planting poison does not require great physical strength, whereas in *Murder on the Orient Express* the doctor explicitly says that some stab wounds are too slight to be lethal (it is for the theatricality why all twelve passengers are considered to be the killers, but the lethal wound was almost definitely administered by a man). Both analyzed full-length novels without poison feature more than one killer. What they might lack in the complexity of the sole act of murder, they make up for with the heterogeneity of the killers. In all three analyzed novels with

poison, there is only one murderer (even though in *Sparkling Cyanide* Rosemary and George were killed by different people, Rosemary's death is not considered to be a part of the plot since the story begins six months after her death, and in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Miss Howard is the murderer and Alfred Inglethorp merely an accomplice).

As for the detectives, both Poirot's and Marple's most important asset is their brain. The biggest part of their crime-solving revolves around them sitting back and quietly thinking until they reach a conclusion. Poirot, though, does have a great advantage – he is a professional who often has access to physical clues and the murder scene, while Marple has to satisfy with less. She knows that, being not that popular with the police, her suspicions based on intuition would not be as credible, which is why in “Death by Drowning” she turns to Henry Clithering to investigate her claims, knowing that the police will pay more attention to his words than hers, whereas Poirot is more esteemed and praised in police circles and does not have any problems of that kind. One way or another, they both manage to solve the puzzle despite all the difficulties, leaving the reader in awe of their abilities.

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