Women Characters in the Works of Agatha Christie

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Dvopredmetni sveučilišni diplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti – nastavnički smjer i mađarskog jezika i književnosti

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Diplomski rad

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

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Znanstveno polje: filologija

Znanstvena grana: anglistika

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Osijek, 2022.

Josip Juraj Strossmayer University of Osijek

Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Double Major MA Study Programme in English Language and Literature and

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Master's Thesis

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Ime i prezime studentice, JMBAG

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Abstract

Agatha Christie is generally considered a conservative and traditional writer who wrote formulaic detective novels with two-dimensional and stereotypical characters. For this reason, during most of the twentieth century, her novels have been dismissed for lacking intellectual and literary value, and her women characters overlooked by feminist critics because of her conservative Victorian values. This paper will, firstly, look into the history of the detective and crime genre to situate Christie into a literary context. Furthermore, the paper will explore the sociocultural context of the time of Christie's life and work, focusing on the position of women in the society, as well as Christie's own views on women and feminism. Afterwards, the paper will closely analyze the women characters in four of her novels: *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924)*, Death on the Nile* (1937), *Five Little Pigs* (1942), and *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952). Before reaching its conclusion, the paper will consider works of critics and scholars written on the matter and try to categorize the previously analyzed characters. The aim of this MA paper is to, by analyzing the above-mentioned aspects of her life and works, argue that Agatha Christie, through her characters, manages to depict a large variety of different women of her time who assume different roles in both the society and the plot of her novels.

Key Words: Agatha Christie, women, crime fiction, detective fiction, the Golden Age, *The Man in the Brown Suit, Death on the Nile, Five Little Pigs, Mrs McGinty's Dead*

Introduction

Over a hundred years after the publication of her first novel, not only does Agatha Christie remain one of the most popular writers of detective fiction, but she also holds the title of the best-selling fiction writer ever, with over two billion copies sold. In the last century, however, she has been targeted by critics for her conservative Victorian views, claiming she was hostile toward feminists and career women, while scholars often dismissed her works, considering them formulaic middlebrow fiction of little literary value and poor characterization. The first chapter of this paper will provide a brief overview of the crime and detective fiction genre up to its Golden Age in order to situate Christie into a literary context and consider how its format influenced Christie's characterization of characters. The second chapter will provide the necessary sociocultural context surrounding Christie's life and literary career, mentioning the most important changes in gender dynamics and women's position in the society. This chapter also considers her views of career women and feminism, often targeted by her critics. The third chapter, starting with a brief analysis of her most often discussed characters – the female sleuths, will provide an in-depth analysis of the female characters in four selected novels: *The Man in the Brown Suit, Death on the Nile, Five Little Pigs,* and *Mrs McGinty's Dead*. The fourth and final chapter considers works of various scholars written on the topic of Christie's female characters and summarizes the characters from the previous chapter by grouping them in order to determine whether Christie's characters should be considered two-dimensional stereotypes or successful depictions of diverse femininities.

The aim of this MA paper is to analyze the genre, the sociocultural trends of the time, Christie's own views on women and feminism and some of her female characters, and to argue that, despite the often thin and stereotypical characterization, she still successfully depicts the different types of women living in the still predominantly conservative British society of her time.

1. Crime Fiction and Detective Fiction

1.1. Definition and Beginnings

Even though she experimented with other genres, the majority of Agatha Christie's extensive oeuvre could fit into the genres most commonly termed crime fiction or detective fiction, though "murder-mystery" is also frequently used to categorize her novels. However, "mystery" was one of the "archetypes" into which John Cawelti divided popular literature over fifty years ago, along with the female-oriented Romance and male-oriented Adventure genre (Rzepka 2). Rzepka further notes that, though "literary detection clearly belongs to the Mystery archetype, it is difficult to place most crime stories there because so few of them involve any real mystery" (2).

While some theorists use the terms crime fiction and detective fiction interchangeably, as synonyms, there are others who point out their differences. Heather Worthington argues that "crime fiction as a genre requires a crime, a criminal, and a victim, plus (usually) a detective and (often) the police" (17), which, if all of the mentioned elements are considered as requirements, somewhat blurs the lines between the definitions of crime fiction and detective fiction. Heta Pyrhönen juxtaposes the two terms and points out other critics' claims that the term crime fiction "came into existence as an oppositional discourse that violates the basic generic conventions of detective narratives" (44). She defines detective fiction as "a narrative whose principal action concerns the attempt by an investigator to solve a crime and to bring a criminal to justice" (Pyrhönen 43), while crime fiction, according to her, is "a variant that began burgeoning from the 1930s onwards," which "focuses on a criminal's mind and deeds" (Pyrhönen 44). She also notes that while detective fiction poses the questions of "Whodunit?" and "Who is guilty," crime fiction focuses more on the "Whydunit?".

While the boundaries of the crime and detective fiction genres and their definitions seem rather foggy and disputable, various theorists in different guides and companions to crime fiction agree that the genre's roots can be traced back to the eighteenth century, a time when there was no "reliable system of policing, or of the detection of criminals on any routine basis" (Bell 7). The *Newgate Calendars*, first published in 1773, were the pioneer anthologies of "true crime" stories, and consisted of accounts of "the lives, crimes, confessions, and executions of the criminals" (Worthington 14) of the Newgate Prison in London.

As both Bell and Worthington point out, the most popular genre of the second half of the century, which also featured crimes in its plots, was Gothic fiction. Retrospectively considering some of the Gothic novels written in the eighteenth century, various theorists have argued that some of them feature characters that can be regarded as the first amateur proto-detective or detective figures (Worthington 16). Bell, however, argues that it was in the early nineteenth century, when the punishments for crimes were becoming less severe, that the "detective hero" first came to be (16).

The early nineteenth century also saw the birth of the Newgate novel, most popular in the 1830s and 1840s and heavily inspired by the writings of the *Newgate Calendar.* They were "crime novels, and, in some cases historical novels, which chronicled the 'adventures and escapes of independent, courageous criminals, often legendary eighteenth-century robbers and highwaymen'" (Pykett 19), harshly criticized for romanticizing and glamourizing crime, as well as for sympathizing with the criminals. Dickens's *Oliver Twist* is arguably the only such novel that managed to stand the test of time and be considered a classic to this day, while another of his novels, *Great Expectations*, is considered an example of the other subgenre significant for the Victorian era – the sensation novel, popular in the 1860s. Pykett defines the novels of this subgenre as the "tales of modern life that dealt in nervous, psychological, sexual and social shocks, and had complicated plots involving bigamy, adultery, seduction, fraud, forgery, blackmail, kidnapping and, sometimes, murder" (33). She also points out that, unlike the Newgate fiction, whose most relevant works were all written by men, there was a significant number of women writers who wrote popular sensation novels. Furthermore, the sensation novels also saw an increasing number of female criminals as well as female amateur detectives (Pykett 35). One of the most important novelties the sensation fiction brought with it was "the shift of focus from crime to detection" (Pykett 34), presumably a result of a series of changes in England's policing. Like their Newgate predecessors, the sensation novels caused debates and their authors, especially those of female gender, were criticized for "knowing too much" about the "'unpleasant' subjects" of their novels and the explicitness when writing about "the feelings and physical desires of their female characters" (Pykett 36).

Another literary form whose development is of great importance for the development of crime fiction is the short story, which was very prominent in the nineteenth century. A name frequently associated with its development is that of Edgar Allan Poe, who is likewise credited for his contributions to the development of "the detective." Another writer responsible for the development of both the short story and the detective story, and their

popularization in Britain, was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the author of arguably the most famous detective of all times – Sherlock Holmes. His appearance marks a new trend in mystery-solving – the portrayal of detectives as remarkable intellectuals.

The late nineteenth century also saw the birth of the first "lady detectives." Just like in nursing and teaching, women employed in policing, a difficult area for them to thread into at the time due to social prejudices, were employed not for their intelligence but for their "supposed skills in gaining the confidence of and caring for the young and vulnerable" (Kayman 52). The "lady detectives" were then regarded as a combination of a traditional male detective and "the promiscuous, mendacious and hysterical woman" (Kayman 52), possessing the beneficial skills of an actress as well. While such an "unladylike" job clashed with the traditional domestic female duties, the careers of the first "lady detective" characters would often last only until they got married or until they proved the innocence of their falsely accused husbands. By the first decade of the twentieth century, disguise was often utilized as an acceptable means in a lady detective's investigation process; they were valued for their knowledge of the domestic and family-related topics, as well as for their "womanly intuition" and common sense (Kayman 53).

1.2. The "Golden Age" of Detective Fiction

The literary time period in which Agatha Christie began her career and published the majority of her most acclaimed detective novels is universally known as "the Golden Age" of detective and crime fiction. As J. C. Bernthal points out, the exact timeframe of this era is not agreed upon by the theorists, but the most common understanding is that it refers to the time period between the two great world wars, when an abundance of new detective novel writers emerged, the 1920s and 1930s (3). This period is mostly associated with the format referred to as "the clue-puzzle" (Knight 80), whose mechanism includes multiple suspects, an abundance of clues presented to the readers, as well as murder becoming "essential as the central crime" (Knight 77). Furthermore, Knight lists "the flat style and the two-dimensional characterisation" (91), for which Christie is often criticized, as another characteristic of the clue-puzzles.

Despite Agatha Christie being by far the most well-known and best-selling writer of this period, there are several other names who penned novels of this format worth mentioning,

such as Dorothy L. Sayers and A. B. Cox, both of whom are credited for their "more elaborate writing and depth characterisation" (Knight 78). Along with Christie, they were members of a body of crime writers called "The Detection Club," who came up with the rules of "fair play" for writing detective novels, which Ronald Knox summarized as "Ten Commandments of Detection" (1928) (Bernthal 4; Rowland, "The 'Classical' Model of the Golden Age" 119). However, the rules of "fair play" were subsequently broken by the majority of its members, including Christie.

In her analysis of the Golden Age novels, Susan Rowland equates the majority of said novels to detective fiction and points out the self-referentiality and self-consciousness of the characters (118). The characters in these novels often refer to other famous fictional detectives such as Holmes or Dupin as real people or satirically comment on detective fiction and its readers. Juxtaposed to the aforementioned detectives, who were at the time considered "a model of impeccable male heroism" (Rowland, "The 'Classical' Model of the Golden Age" 118), are the feminized detectives such as Christie's Hercule Poirot and Sayers's Lord Peter Wimsey. Further adding to the feminization of detective figures is the style of detection used, which is described by Rowland as a mix of "masculine" (the rational, logical analysis of clues) and "feminine" (the nonrational, emotive and psychological) methods ("The 'Classical' Model of the Golden Age" 121).

Apart from the feminization of male detectives, there is also a significant number of female characters with important and varied roles in the Golden Age novels, including female detectives, most typically elderly amateur sleuths such as Christie's Miss Marple. The strength of such characters, as Adrianne E. Gavin points out, lies in "their apparent innocuousness" and the other's "underestimation of their capabilities to their advantage" (263).

Although this period lasted roughly around two decades, many of its most prominent writers, including Christie, continued writing novels with the same formula throughout their careers, which is why some crime and detective fiction theorists have adopted the term "the Golden Age detective novels" to refer to that specific subgenre or format of writing.

2. Agatha Christie

2.1. Her Life and Career in a Sociocultural Context

While the previous chapter situates Christie into a literary context and suggests how the literary trends of the time influenced her writing, this chapter is set to examine how the sociocultural factors of the time she lived in and wrote her most famous works in influenced her writing and depiction of characters, focusing on the position of women in the society.

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller was born in 1890 in Torquey as the youngest of three children of the American Frederick Alvah Miller and his wife Clara. Being the only child left in the house, she was doted upon by both the servants and her parents. She spent her childhood and adolescence in the rural England in the Victorian and Edwardian era, in a family of traditional Victorian values, which is why she was not much influenced by the cultural changes occurring at the time outside of her family realm.

At the time Agatha was going through her adolescence and early youth, in Britain the "new woman" novelists and other feminists were publicly attacking the "traditional, patriarchal marriage, characterized by inequality between the spouses and the notion of the 'natural' subordination of the wife" (Kent 246), popular during the Victorian and Edwardian eras, and trying to reassess its meaning to "one that emphasized companionship and partnership" (Kent 246). While her own ideal of marriage was more of a traditional one, influenced by the happy marriage of her parents, like many other Golden Age writers, Christie would later publish novels depicting relationships and marriages based on "comradeship."

During the First World War, while men were fighting away from home, it was necessary for women to assume their "male" jobs in England, and Agatha Christie was one of them. While her fiancée was deployed abroad, Agatha "joined the Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD), a group of nurses' helpers who paid for their training in wound care, sanitation and hygiene" (Hack 55). A year later she joined the hospital dispensary where she gathered all her knowledge about poisons, which would later prove useful in her writing of detective novels. It was during the war years when Agatha started writing detective novels as a hobby.

After the war ended, the women employed during the war were awarded the right to vote, though only those married and over thirty years of age. The after-war period, especially the 1920s, is recognized by many theorists as the period of visible blurring of the separate spheres for men and women and renegotiation of gender roles. The young men became more

feminized, while women were more boyish. Abandoning the corsets during the war, women started dressing "in boyish fashions, cut their hair short, smoked cigarettes, drove cars, and generally pursued an active, adventurous lifestyle" (Kent 287). Such women were considered fashionable at the time, gracing the covers of magazines until 1928 (Kent 290).

Christie described the post-First World War years as some of the happiest in her life. She was married to the man she loved, Archie Christie, gave birth to her daughter in 1919, and published her first novel in 1920, followed by a few more in the following years. In 1922, the Christies were invited to travel the world by an acquaintance of Archie's and their first stops included Cape Town, South Africa and Rhodesia, the settings used for Agatha's 1924 novel *The Man in the Brown Suit*. As she was writing and publishing more and more critically acclaimed novels, she was becoming less dependent on her husband, and the marriage soon faltered.

The year of 1926 was the most turbulent one of Agatha's life. After the death of her mother, which left her suffering from depression, her husband, who was having an affair with another woman, asked for divorce. Agatha did not take this news well and it resulted in what would remain known as the mysterious disappearance of Agatha Christie. Although Christie herself never properly addressed this event, one of her detective novels, *Five Little Pigs* (1942), written years later, is partially set in this year.

While in 1928 the female population over twenty-one were allowed to vote, the boyish flappers stopped being modern, and the 1930s again called for more feminine women (Kent 290). This was a decade when it was common for women to work until marriage and then, because of the social and political pressure, to quit their jobs and return to the more traditional roles of housewives and mothers. Agatha Christie spent the two years prior to this decade as a divorced woman and a single mother while continuing writing, publishing novels, and travelling. By the beginning of the decade, she was already married to her second husband, Max Mallowan, a young archeologist (fourteen years younger than her), whom she was introduced to during one of her travels. She spent the rest of the decade, as well as the following ones, traveling and enjoying her marriage, while writing and publishing many of her most famous foreign travel novels, such as *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and *Death on the Nile* (1937).

As several theorists note, after the Second World War, in which women were again required to be employed, it was not as easy to make them leave their jobs after war.

Consequently, the following decades saw an increasing number of working women, or "career women." These social changes are depicted in many of Christie's novels, such as *Cat Among the Pigeons* (1959) and *Third Girl* (1966), in which one of the elderly characters notes: "The young girls, they all do jobs nowadays" (qtd. in Makinen, *Investigating* 91). Another social change often depicted by Christie, in novels such as *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952), is the change in domestic employment, i.e., the lack of competent servants, which was characteristic of the post-World War One period as well.

Agatha Christie had lived through the two great world wars and the social, political, and cultural changes of those decades. Consciously or unconsciously, more or less subtly, she depicted those changes in her fiction, focusing on how these events affected the people, that is, her characters.

2.2. Agatha Christie's Views of Women and Feminism

Being generally considered a conservative writer of Victorian upbringing and views writing plot-driven detective novels, most twentieth-century critics and commentators have dismissed Christie's female characters as unworthy of analyzing. Those who did write about them, however, pointed out a negative portrayal of career women or comments about women based on gender stereotypes uttered by her characters. Furthermore, it was believed that Christie was against career women and feminism, as evidenced by her own words written in her *Autobiography*.

In her *Autobiography*, Christie expresses her admiration for Victorian women, who had "their menfolk where they wanted them" (location 2230). Furthermore, she discusses what it meant for her and her contemporaries to be a young woman at the beginning of the century:

> The real excitement of being a girl–of being, that is, a woman in embryo–was that life was such a wonderful gamble. *You didn't know what was going to happen to you*. That was what made being a woman so exciting. No worry about what you should be or do–Biology would decide. You were waiting for The Man, and when the man came, he would change your entire life. (Christie, *An Autobiography,* locations 2169-171)

Here she compares her contemporaries to the young women of the 1950s and 1960s, for whose lifestyles she shows disapproval not only in this work, but also in her detective novels written at the time. Despite her attempts to keep up with them, the social changes proved too much for an elderly Christie.

While Christie never directly mentions feminism in her *Autobiography*, she does, however, state that "[t]he position of women, over the years, has definitely changed for the worse" (locations 2224-225), and deems women wanting to do the same jobs as men and provide for themselves foolish: "We women have behaved like mugs. We have clamoured to be allowed to work as men work. Men, not being fools, have taken kindly to the idea. Why support a wife? What's wrong with a wife supporting *herself*? She *wants* to do it. By Golly, she can go on doing it!" (locations 2225-226). Moreover, Laura Thompson, the author of Christie's most recent biography, points to Christie's interview from 1962, in which she was asked "how . . . had it happened that women now played a more active role in public life" (*Agatha Christie*, location 459), to which she answered: "Probably due to the foolishness of women in relinquishing their position of privilege attained after many centuries of civilisation. Primitive women toil incessantly. We seem determined to return to that state voluntarily – or by listening to persuasion, and therefore forfeiting the joys of leisure and creative thought, and the perfecting of home conditions" (qtd. in Thompson, *Agatha Christie*, locations 459-62). Thompson states that "Agatha was never a feminist," yet argues that "she knew perfectly well the value of women, which she considered feminism helped to devalue" (*Agatha Christie*, locations 457-58).

Many critics note that Christie did not consider herself a career woman, as is visible in her *Autobiography,* with some pointing out she "insisted that her passport should list her profession as 'housewife'" (Bernthal 3). However, although she dismissed writing as a career on several occasions throughout her *Autobiography*, she nevertheless singled out the moment she "changed from an amateur to a professional" and "assumed the burden of a profession" (location 6316) when she had to write a novel after her mother's death; after the success of her 1946 novel *The Hollow*, she started considering writing her "steady, solid profession" (location 8391). Despite often being reluctant to admit it, Christie was, in fact, a successful career woman. This might be the reason why career women are mostly not portrayed negatively in her novels, as will be discussed and exemplified in the following chapters.

Gillian Gill, one of Christie's biographers, argues that "although the former Agatha Miller was 'if anything, radically anti-feminist in her pronouncements,' Christie the novelist

was remarkably egalitarian in her views toward the sexes" (qtd. in Mehren). In her novels, Christie wrote about a variety of topics also discussed by her more feminist contemporaries, such as gender dynamics and the position of women in the society. Regardless of her own views, Christie's representation of women and women-related matters in her works is worthy of analysis. As Susan Rowland accurately points out: "A writer need not call herself a feminist nor be female for her writing to be concerned with 'feminist' questions of power, gender and the social roles of women" (*From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* 157).

3. Agatha Christie's Women Characters

3.1. The Recurring Characters: The Sleuths

Although the most famous of Christie's female sleuths, such as Miss Jane Marple and Tuppence Beresford, are not the main focus of this paper, as they do not appear in any of the analyzed novels, they are certainly the most popular among the critics and scholars investigating Christie, with many of them either dedicating a chapter to them or writing studies about them.

Miss Jane Marple is not only Christie's most popular female detective, but one of the most well-known female detectives in literature. Featured in twelve novels and around twenty short stories, the famous elderly spinster sleuth made her first appearance in 1928 and, according to Hack, in her "Agatha found a kindred spirit whose observations she enjoyed creating" (131). Her village insider image is the direct opposite of Poirot's image of a foreigner and an outsider, and their novels differ as well. In her *A Companion to Crime Fiction* chapter about Agatha Christie, Merja Makinen argues that "Miss Marple manipulates the sexist and ageist prejudices about old ladies being worthless to society, lacking in intellectual ability and outmoded in their assumptions and expectations, adopting the persona the society expects as effective camouflage" ("Agatha Christie" 422).

Prudence "Tuppence" Beresford first appeared in Christie's 1922 novel *The Secret Adversary*, together with her husband Tommy forming a famous detective duo, described as "'bright young things' looking for work and adventure after the First World War" (Makinen, *Investigating* 27). Despite starting her career as a secretary and being portrayed as a sidekick to Tommy, Tuppence proves to be the more competent detective of the two, recognized by male characters as an intelligent and capable woman who can look after herself. Tommy and Tuppence's relationship and marriage is depicted as a "comradeship" and a "joint venture," the kind of relationship Christie yearned for in her own marriage. Melissa Schaub, in her feminist study *Middlebrow Feminism*, identifies Tuppence as one of the characters that fit the profile of heroines acting like gentlemen: she is "the most gentlemanly of Christie's heroines" (77); Schaub also places her in the categories of "flapper heroines" and "boy-girls" (76).

Ariadne Oliver, the writer of detective novels and Poirot's occasional sidekick, who makes her third appearance in *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, is the only recurring character to be

discussed later on in this paper, as a part of the analysis of the female characters in the said novel.

3.2. Women Characters in *The Man in the Brown Suit* (1924)

The first of the four analyzed novels is the only one whose genre has been a subject of debates. Both Makinen and Christie herself refer to it as more of a thriller than a detective novel; Wessels argues that the novel is "compromised by the personal and autobiographical elements that instigated and propelled its creation and by the alternative genres of the adventure story and colonial romance suggested by its setting" (20), while also featuring elements of the classic "whodunnit" detective novel. What makes this novel stand out is that it is narrated almost entirely from a female perspective, making it, according to Bernthal, one of only two Christie novels to feature a female first-person narrator (41). This novel also covers an abundance of themes related to women, such as the institution of marriage, romance and love, domesticity vs adventurousness, and female friendship.

The main plot of this novel is presented as a retrospective recount of the extraordinary adventure of the protagonist Anne Beddingfield, which took place two years prior to her assuming the task of writing down the story, after being asked to do so by multiple people. The said adventure starts with Anne's witnessing the death of a mysterious man and deciding to follow a clue all the way to South Africa, and ends in her uncovering the murderer of a mysterious woman and the identity of a criminal mastermind. In her narration, Anne occasionally uses excerpts from the diary of Sir Eustace Pedler, "of which he has kindly begged me to use," in order to fill in "the gaps that I cannot supply from my own knowledge" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 9).

She starts her narration by providing background information about her life before moving to London, where her adventure, and the main plot of the novel, begins. Anne is a young girl who grew up in a small village raised only by her father, Professor Beddingfield, an anthropologist, her mother having died when she was very young. Her father was a man passionately and entirely devoted to his work, not caring about matters such as money, which resulted in Anne having to act as the adult and worry about finances. She was never very emotionally attached to her father, and is, therefore, not significantly affected when he dies of double pneumonia, after one of his visits to the cavern.

After her father's death, Anne decides to go to London in search of adventure akin to that of Pamela, the heroine of the film serial *The Perils of Pamela*, whom Anne describes as "a magnificent young woman," though "not really clever" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 12). Pamela would get herself into dangerous situations only to be rescued by the male protagonist by the end of each episode. *Anna the Adventuress* is meant to be a smarter and more independent version of Pamela, who does not necessarily need a man to rescue her every time. Although she does get rescued by her love interest, Harry Rayburn, on two occasions, unlike Pamela, she also proves capable of saving herself, when she gets kidnapped by the enemy and manages to escape without anyone's help. However, the more the story progresses, the more Anne starts realizing that being a heroine of an adventure novel or movie is not as fun and harmless as she thought, because, in real life, there is no sequel to guarantee that the heroine will not end her life prematurely. Various scholars point out that *The Perils of Pamela* is based on *The Perils of Pauline*, a popular 1914 film serial featuring the trope of damsel in destress. J.C. Bernthal sees Anne as a "deeply ironic female narrator" that Christie uses to satirize the "heroines of the popular entertainment" (40) and argues that the entire novel is a parody of the male-authored adventure novels that depict women as passive and in need of male rescuing.

Anne Beddingfeld possesses many character traits admired by other characters. Sir Eustace Pedler, apart from her "particularly good legs" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 95) and clear eyes, admires her cleverness. Suzanne Blair is drawn to her because of her mysteriousness, calling her "the most unusual creature" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 109), and as she gets to know her better, she starts admiring her adventurous spirit, especially the brave and reckless act of setting off on a journey to the other end of the world alone and with virtually no money. She states that Anne is "absurdly proud and independent" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 128), but also admires her ability to be practical and passionate at the same time. Suzanne is also the one who nicknames her "Gypsy girl," stating that it suits her and that "[i]t's the gypsy element in you that makes you so different from anyone else" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 82). Anne fully embraces this nickname, which seems to suit both her free-spirited and nomadic nature as well as her physique, by wearing a gypsy costume to the dance and by referring to herself "a gypsy girl seeing the world" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 201).

The romantic subplot is very prominent in the novel: Anne claims to want a relationship of "comradeship." Furthermore, she expresses her opinion about marriage and

gender dynamics. She does not entirely oppose the idea of marriage and does see herself being married someday, but only if she is madly in love. Much like Christie, Anne refuses two marriage proposals and Makinen argues that "she conceives of marriage as suburban domesticity" (*Investigating* 69), which she wants to get away from, yearning for adventure. However, Anne is also aware of the fact that there are many unhappy marriages, which she blames on the husbands not knowing how to treat their wives:

> And that's why there are so many unhappy marriages. It's all the fault of the men. Either they give way to their women – and then the women despise them – or else they are utterly selfish, insist on their own way and never say "thank you". Successful husbands make their wives do just what they want, and then make a frightful fuss of them for doing it. Women like to be mastered, but they hate not to have their sacrifices appreciated. On the other hand, men don't really appreciate women who are nice to them all the time. When I am married, I shall be a devil most of the time, but every now and then, when my husband least expects it, I shall show him what a perfect angel I can be! (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 216)

Being young and inexperienced, her views on marriage and love are based on those she has observed in her village and read about in her novels. She is very impulsive and feels very intensely and passionately. She verbally expresses her love and desire for Harry, an act which Makinen terms "highly sexual" (*Investigating* 70). Furthermore, she is extremely jealous, even of a dead woman she never met, leading her to over-villainize Nadina and utter things such as "*I* could have killed her that moment, had she stood before me" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 132) or "she was the kind of woman who deserved to die" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 310).

Anne's views of the power dynamic between the sexes, however, are influenced by her father's anthropological views. When Colonel Race asks her if she considers women to be "weak things," she responds that she does not, even though she assumes that they currently are, but were once equal to men in their physical power. Although women became weaker after the humans settled down in communities, she claims that "one still *feels* the same," which is why "women worship physical strength in men: it's what they once had and have lost" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 199).

In the novel's final chapter, Anne Beddinfeld shows that she fully condemns Nadina's deceitfulness while she tries to excuse a male character's being a murderer because she finds him sympathetic. Both Makinen and Bernthal, however, focus more on Anne's ability to, as a woman, see Sir Eustace's deeds as more complex, in "shades of gray" (Bernthal 47), instead of the black (guilty) and white (innocent), as Harry sees it.

In this novel, Christie also depicts a female friendship quite rare in her works, based on mutual admiration between two women, which could be considered "a form of early 'sisterhood' and feminine solidarity" (Makinen, *Investigating* 69). The friendship in question is that between Anne and Suzanne Blair, a married society lady, somewhat older and much more experienced than Anne.

Suzanne Blair is a good-looking woman in her thirties, wealthy, wife of Clarence Blair. She is a married woman who loves being married, but her views on marriage differ from Anne's. Suzanne sees marriage as more of a business deal that secures financial stability and social status. She prefers not to spend too much time with her husband, opting for travelling alone and socializing with other people. She is fully aware of the appeal her status of a married woman has on the male population, but she claims to be faithful to her husband.

Suzanne displays many admirable qualities, such as intelligence, a great sense of humor, authoritativeness, determination, as well as great social skills and emotional intelligence. She is a woman who "had experienced most of the ordinary sensations in life" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 108). At the beginning of the novel, she befriends Colonel Race and Anne Beddingfield, deciding that they would be "the only two people on board who wouldn't bore me to death to talk to" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 82). Despite the flirtatious banter between her and Colonel Race at the beginning of the novel, later she plays matchmaker (a motif frequent in Christie novels, usually characteristic of Poirot) with Anne and Race. As the novel progresses, she becomes Anne's one and only true friend. Despite Anne's initial doubts, thinking that such a high-class lady like Mrs Blair probably sees her only as a whim or a novelty, Suzanne proves her wrong by worrying for her every time she goes missing, showing she genuinely cares about her. Suzanne is also the person Anne chooses to confide in once she starts feeling lonely. She becomes Anne's self-proclaimed partner in her mystery-solving adventure and her financier: "We're partners – I wouldn't offer you a penny because I liked you, or because you're a friendless girl – what I want is a thrill, and I'm prepared to pay for it. We're going into this together regardless of

expense. To begin with you'll come with me to the Mount Nelson Hotel at my expense, and we'll plan out our campaign" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 128).

Anita Grünberg, alias Nadina, is a character Christie introduces in the prologue, which is also the only part of the novel written in third person. She has a minor, but very important role in the novel – she is the murder victim, but also a criminal, whose actions set off the main plot. The amount of information the readers get about her in the novel is quite limited. The prologue is the only part of the novel where the readers are able to learn about her character from a neutral point of view and shape their own opinion about her character. In it, it is revealed that this mysterious woman, introduced as Nadina, a Russian dancer performing in Paris, is not actually Russian, but South African, and that she is a criminal – a thief and possibly a spy, who used to work for the notorious criminal known as "the Colonel." Furthermore, it is revealed that during her involvement in the robbery of the De Beer diamonds right before the First World War she had managed to gather evidence that would prove that "the Colonel" was behind the robbery. She was very proud of herself and the fact that she, a woman, could potentially be responsible for the downfall of such a clever and powerful man: "She rose and stood in front of him, every graceful line if her arrogant with pride. 'You said just now that none of us had anything on the chief. You were wrong. I have. I, a woman, have had the wit and, yes, the courage – for it needs courage – to double-cross him'" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 5).

Nadina also fits the stereotype of a *femme fatale*. Her good looks and mysteriousness allowed her to seduce men without much effort and use them to achieve her goals. Further reinforcing this view is Harry's comparison of her with Delilah, a treacherous and cunning woman:

> Quite young and very beautiful. . . . There was some sort of mystery about her, and that, of course, heightened her attraction for two boys home from the wilds. She must have had an easy task. We both fell for her right away, and we both took it hard. It was the first shadow that had ever come between us – but even then it didn't weaken our friendship. Each of us, I honestly believe, was willing to stand aside for the other to go in and win. But that wasn't her game. Sometimes, afterwards, I wondered why it hadn't been, for Sir Laurence Eardsley's only son was quite a *parti*. But the truth of it was that she was married – to a sorter in De Beers – though nobody knew of it. She pretended enormous interest in our

> discovery, and we told her all about it and even showed her the diamonds. Delilah – that's what she should have been called – and she played her part well! (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 224)

Intelligent, active, resourceful, unscrupulous when it comes to using men for her own gain, and using masquerade to hide her identity, she fits into Makinen's category of "women behaving badly" (*Investigating* 115). However, despite her cleverness, she is unable to outmatch her boss, a male criminal mastermind. Her greed and, seemingly, overestimation of her own abilities, or underestimation of his, result in her murder at the Colonel's hand.

Another minor character appearing only at the beginning of the novel is Mrs Flemming, the wife of Anne's father's London solicitor Mr Flemming, in whose house Anne stays briefly before departing to South Africa. While almost insignificant plot-wise, she and her friends epitomize the traditional English housewives of the time. They like talking about their every-day problems and dislike knowing about the world or traveling outside of England, which is what Anne reproaches them the most:

> Mrs Flemming and her friends seemed to me to be supremely uninteresting. They talked for hours of themselves and their children and of the difficulties of getting good milk for the children and of what they said to the dairy when the milk wasn't good. Then they would go on to servants, and the difficulties of getting good servants and of what they said to the woman at the registry office and of what the woman at the registry office had said to them. They never seemed to read the papers or to care about what went on in the world. They disliked travelling – everything was so different to England. The Riviera was all right, of course, because one met all one's friends there. (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 23)

Anne characterizes these ladies as "stupid" (Christie, *The Man in the Brown Suit* 23) because they were also incompetent in their one and only job – housekeeping. The topics of (in)competent housewives and the lack of good servants are the recurrent ones in Christie's novels, reflecting the social and cultural changes of the time, and will be discussed again in *Mrs McGinty's Dead*.

3.3. Women Characters in *Death on the Nile* (1937)

Christie's novel *Death on the Nile* is one of her more famous novels and one that Christie herself considered one of her best "'foreign travel' ones" (*Death on the Nile* vii). This novel has a very high number of characters, many of whom are women. Despite not appearing in the novel more than some other female characters, Linnet Ridgeway (later Doyle) and Jacqueline de Bellefort are the two characters usually regarded as main and, together with Simon Doyle, they form a love triangle central to the plot of the novel.

Linnet Ridgeway is the first female character introduced. She is a twenty-year-old millionaire heiress envied by many for her beauty and wealth. She is presented as the kind of woman who never had to worry about much in her life and who is used to getting everything she wants the way she wants it. At the beginning of the novel, Joanna Southwood, one of her friends, perfectly summarizes how most people, including her, regard Linnet: "You know, Linnet, I really do envy you. You've simply got *everything*. Here you are at twenty, your own mistress, with any amount of money, looks, superb health. You've even got *brains*!" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 7). Moreover, Joanna calls her "the Girl Who Has Everything" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 21), claiming that what she cannot buy with money, she achieves with her charm, while her best friend at the time, Jacqueline de Bellefort, calls her "a queen" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 12). Linnet likes being a queen and adores the freedom and independence her own money can provide for her. Wode Hall, the property she buys and renovates at the beginning of the novel, is her kingdom and she is not ready to give it up by marrying a rich lord and becoming a "queen consort, not queen any longer" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 23). Once Linnet meets her best friend's fiancé, Simon Doyle, a good-looking, poor and simple man, she decides she likes him a bit too much. He is the kind of man who does not pose a threat to her queen status and, since he does not own nearly as much money as Linnet, would make a perfect husband for her. After a time jump of about two months, it is revealed that Linett and Simon are married.

Naturally, this turn of events comes with consequences – her once best friend becomes her enemy. Despite not wanting to admit it, Linnet feels guilty for what she did to Jacqueline, not only because she was her best friend, but also because that was the first time she consciously did something to hurt somebody. The act of "stealing" her best friend's fiancé is met with scorn and disapproval of the older, more conservative characters such as Mrs Allerton and Hercule Poirot, the latter being more empathetic toward Jacqueline. Thus, Poirot

is reluctant to accept her plea for help, explaining that there is nothing that can be done legally to stop Jacqueline from following them around. Poirot psychoanalyzes her, calls her out, and makes her admit she feels guilty. Further in the novel, she again communicates to Poirot her fear for her own life: "I'm afraid, I tell you. Everyone hates me. I've never felt like that before. I've always been nice to people – I've done things for them – and they hate me – lots of people hate me. Except for Simon, I'm surrounded by enemies… It's terrible to feel – that there are people who hate you" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 107). The feelings of guilt and fear for her own life persist until she is murdered, and Poirot investigates the case. Considering the novel in terms of its colonialist underpinnings, Susan Rowland uses a colonialist analogy to describe Linnet: "Linnet proves first an invader, literally taking over her best friend Jackie's fiancé, then oppressor, then murder victim" (*From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* 74).

Linnet also proves to be a capable businesswoman who outmatches many men in that field, which does not make her an easy target for swindlers such as her American lawyer, Andrew Pennington. Pennington's attempt to make her sign some documents without reading them proves useless because Linnet is not as trusting and naïve as her husband Simon but is used to reading everything before signing, a habit learned from her father.

As a part of the same love triangle, Linnet is compared and contrasted with her ex-best-friend Jacqueline. Jacqueline "Jackie" de Bellefort is introduced at the beginning of the novel as Linnet's "oldest friend," whom she met "at a convent in Paris" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 8). Jackie is a daughter of a French Count and an American woman from South Carolina, who, after her husband left her, "lost all her money in the Wall Street crash" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 8), which left Jacqueline broke as well. Nevertheless, Jacqueline never turned to her wealthy friend for help with her financial situation and she was even too proud to accept her help when offered. Once she falls madly in love and gets engaged she does come to Linnet for help, but even then, it is not to ask for money, but to give her future husband a job so he could earn enough money for them to get married. She never cared about money and was never driven by greed, but she is a passionate and vindictive person not willing to let go of the man she loved. When Hercule Poirot sees her for the first time, he concludes that "she cares too much, that little one" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 18) and considers the intensity of her emotions dangerous. Linnet mentions to Poirot that Jacqueline also threatened her and Simon but neither of them took her threats seriously: "She threatened to – well – kill us both. Jackie can be rather – Latin sometimes" (Christie, *Death on the Nile*

72). As she is "partly Latin," i.e. of French origin, the adjective "Latin" is often used to describe and justify her passionate, hot blooded, and impulsive nature. Because of his fondness of Jacqueline, Poirot tries to convince her to leave the past behind and that bitterness and revenge will not benefit anyone, but his attempt is futile. Despite not murdering Linnet, she is revealed to be the murderer of the other two victims, working together with Simon, Linnet's true killer. She is also the mastermind behind the plan to kill Linett, which required "the cool, resourceful, planning brain" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 356) such as hers, which Simon did not possess. Melissa Schaub emphasizes this as well, stating that "she is both mentally and morally superior to her lover" (85). The reason for her actions is attributed to one of the most common and powerful motivators – love.

This novel features another female criminal, though not murderer – Joanna Southwood. She only appears at the very beginning of the novel as a friend of Linnet Ridgeway. Later in the novel, she is only mentioned by other characters, such as her second cousin Tim Allerton, his mother Mrs Allerton, and Hercule Poirot. In her conversation with Linnet, she reveals that she only cares about successful people and that she would turn her back on any friend, including Linnet, if they were suddenly left penniless and suggests her to do the same with Jacqueline. She is described by Mrs Allerton, as "insincere, affected, and essentially superficial" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 27). This description is proved to be correct when revealed that Joanna was involved in many jewelry robberies, with her cousin Tim Allerton as her accomplice.

The passenger list of the cruise ship includes three American women – Miss Van Shulyer, a wealthy old aristocratic lady, her nurse Miss Bowers, and her poor relative Cornelia Robson. Miss Marie Van Schuyler is described as "the very ugly old American lady who obviously feels herself the queen of the boat and who is clearly going to be very exclusive and speak to nobody who doesn't come up to the most exacting standards" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 113). She is later revealed to be a kleptomaniac and the stealer of Linnet Doyle's pearls, which is the main reason Miss Bowers is required to travel with her, along with making sure no one finds out about her habit. Miss Bowers, despite not being hired primarily to look after Miss Van Schulyer's health, proves to be a perfectly capable nurse when her services are required in assisting Dr Bessner. The most interesting character of the three is certainly Cornelia Robson, "a big clumsy-looking girl with brown doglike eyes" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 32) who has never before had a chance to travel abroad, so she is excited and grateful for the opportunity to travel with her cousin and see Egypt. Miss Van

Schuyler claims to be glad to take Cornelia with her because she "has always been a nice handy girl, willing to run errands, and not so selfish as some of these young people nowadays" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 33). She is described as a girl of "an amiable disposition and disposed to like all her fellow creatures" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 117). Despite her father almost being ruined by Linnet's, she does not hold a grudge against her, but admires her. She charms Mr Ferguson by disagreeing with him and showing "a great deal of character," "spirit," and "guts" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 306) despite seeming meek. However, she surprises everyone by standing up for herself and choosing to marry Dr Bessner over Mr Ferguson, whom her cousin would prefer. Dr Bessner, an older gentleman, was not as good-looking as his younger rival, yet could teach her things she found fascinating and could provide her with the stability she yearned for.

Mrs Allerton is the name of a good-looking fifty-year-old woman who lives and travels to Egypt with her son Tim, to whom she is very attached, arguably even too much so. She is generally liked by the people who meet her, who describe her as "a lovely lady" and "distinguished looking" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 118), while her son Tim considers her one of the very few nice women in the world, as well as the only woman he truly admires and respects. She often labels herself as "old-fashioned" before expressing and justifying her traditional views to other characters. Therefore, her dislike of her more liberated peer, Mrs Otterbourne, whom she describes as "appalling" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 97), comes as no surprise. The two of them are exact opposites and, interestingly, the conservative Mrs Allerton is liked while the modern Mrs Otterbourne is disliked by most of the other characters. Even Rosalie, Mrs Otterbourne's daughter, sees Mrs Allerton as an ideal mother, the kind she wished to have.

Mrs Salome Otterbourne is a "writer of sex stories" (Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* 73), travelling with her daughter, in search of inspiration for her next book, *Snow on the Desert's Face*. In her previously published book, *Under the Fig Tree*, she very openly discusses modern and controversial topics of the time such as female sexuality and sex, which she considers to be "the pivot of the universe" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 56). Moreover, the publisher's blurb on the inside of the book "spoke enthusiastically of the superb courage and realism of this study of a modern woman's love life. Fearless, unconventional, realistic were the adjectives used" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 58). "There is no God but Sex, and Salome Otterbourne is its Prophet" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 104), remarks her daughter Rosalie, feeling ashamed of this aspect of her mother's persona, while

Susan Rowland notes her "vulgar, neo-Freudian reduction of all human motives to sex and 'blood lust'" (*From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell* 73). Later on, it is revealed that her writing career is no longer successful because the readers are no longer interested in reading about "all that cheap sex stuff" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 246). Her alcoholism leads to frequent fights with her daughter Rosalie, who tries to take the alcohol away from her mother. She is the third and final murder victim in the novel, being shot right before she could reveal the identity of Louise's killer, who is Linnet's maid and the second victim. The only person to truly lament her death is her daughter, whereas Mr Ferguson remarks she was "a useless fool of a woman" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 304).

Rosalie Otterbourne, Mrs Otterbourne's daughter, is the youngest of the female characters aboard. She is described as a good-looking girl, "the best-looking girl in the place" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 43), according to Tim Allerton, but also "sulky and bad-tempered" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 44). She admits to being extremely jealous of Linnet and even hating her from the moment she saw her, for which she calls herself "odious," stating that she had "never hated anyone so much at first sight" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 51). Mrs Allerton and Poirot are fond of her and lament her evident unhappiness. The latter also remarks that she is an incredibly loyal person to those she cares about. Despite her mother's addiction and unpleasant behavior towards her, Rosalie loves her mother and always tries to protect her and act in her best interest. Furthermore, she keeps quiet about Tim Allerton's whereabouts the night of the murder, trying to protect him. It is later revealed that Tim and Rosalie liked each other, to the delight of Mrs Allerton. Due to Poirot's turning a blind eye to Tim's criminal deeds, the two are able to carry on with their lives and become a couple.

Finally, the last female character relevant to the plot is Linnet's maid Louise Bourget, a "vivacious Latin brunette" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 195) who has the misfortune of being the second murder victim, after trying to blackmail her employer's murderer. Louise does not leave a good impression on neither Poirot, who considered her untrustworthy, nor Colonel Race, who remarks that she is "definitely not a nice girl" (Christie, *Death on the Nile* 203), and both suspect her of being a part of a jewel robbers gang before she is murdered. This is one of the rare instances of Christie depicting domestic workers as more than innocent bystanders or witnesses doing their job.

3.4. Women Characters in *Five Little Pigs* (1942)

What makes *Five Little Pigs* stand out from Christie's other novels is more evident in its American title, *Murder in Retrospect*. While this is not the only murder solved retrospectively (e.g. the following novel analyzed, *Mrs McGinty's Dead*, features a murder committed a few months prior to Poirot's investigation), in this novel the murder Hercule Poirot is set to solve happened sixteen years prior, meaning that his methodology relies even more on the psychological analysis of the victims, witnesses, and suspects than ever before. Accordingly, the novel is described as one of Christie's novels with "a more powerful human dynamic" (Thompson, "An Introduction" x). As the "present" events in the novel are set in 1942, this means that the murder happened in 1926, the year of Agatha Christie's mysterious disappearance. Interestingly, despite Christie's claim that her novels and characters were not based on her own life and the people she knew, many scholars believe that the main love triangle of this novel is based on that of Agatha Christie, her first husband Archie Christie, and his mistress Nancy Neele.

The novel begins with Poirot being approached by a young and beautiful girl called Carla Lemarchant, who, wanting to get married and have children, feels she must get her late mother's name cleared of suspicion for murder of her father, so that her husband and children would never have to fear of her committing the same crime for which her mother was convicted. After her parents' death when she was a child, she was sent to Canada to live with her aunt and uncle, whose last name she took. She reveals to be in a possession of a letter written to her by her mother before her death in which she swears her innocence, which is what motivated her to contact Poirot and convince him to take the case. Though she does not remember much about her mother, she is convinced that her mother was not the kind of person who would lie about such a grave matter in her last letter to her child. Carla is described by Poirot as "an unusual girl. A girl of great force of character" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 20) with an "earnest, thoughtful gaze" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 2). She is said to have her mother's "colouring and her way of moving" while also being "more *positive* than she ever was" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 249).

The late Caroline Crale, Carla's mother, was the wife of the famous painter Amyas Crale, for whose murder she was trialed and convicted. However, she "wasn't hanged because they felt that there were extenuating circumstances – so the sentence was commuted to penal servitude for life. But she died only a year after the trial" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 3). What

kind of woman Caroline Crale had been is one of the main questions Poirot tries to find an answer to in order to determine if she was guilty or innocent, but this is entirely left to the subjective interpretation of the people who knew her, each of whom gives Poirot a different vision of her: "Each person had seen her differently. Montague Depleach had despised her as a defeatist – a quitter. To young Fogg she had represented Romance. Edmunds saw her simply as a 'lady'. Mr Jonathan had called her a stormy, turbulent creature" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 44). Furthermore, Philip Blake, Amyas's best friend, seemingly despised her, but was actually bitter because she had rejected him; his brother Meredith Blake, once in love with Caroline, was always fond of her; Elsa, Amyas's mistress, considered her a horrible woman who could not take defeat with dignity and wished her hanged; Cecilia Williams, the governess, admired her "character and her fortitude in the difficulties of her life" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 205) and her behaving like a true gentlewoman; Angela, Caroline's younger half-sister loved her and always believed in her innocence. There were, however, a few things on which everyone seemed to agree, that could, therefore, be considered facts. Firstly, Caroline often quarreled with her husband, but loved him dearly and because of that, she always forgave his infidelities. Secondly, she did not truly try to defend herself during trial and her performance was entirely unconvincing. Thirdly, she was very fond of and protective of her younger sister Angela, feeling guilty for injuring her and disfiguring her face when Angela was only a baby.

Amyas Crale's young and attractive mistress, Elsa Greer, is the very antithesis of the icily polite gentlewoman Caroline Crale. Elsa's younger version is described as a beautiful girl of twenty, very lively, passionate, exotic, modern, "absolutely free from old-fashioned prejudices" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 170), well-off, and used to getting everything she wants. Her father, however, was a millhand who earned his fortune. A few characters note her scornful honesty, specifically in her very direct and single-minded approach to her lover's wife and marriage: "She actually talked about marrying a married man – and she said it to his wife!" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 218). She shows a very modern approach to the notion of marriage, considering there is no point in continuing a marriage if one of the parties wants out and that, in this case, the wife must accept her loss in a civilized manner and with grace. She claims not to sympathize with jealousy or understand possessiveness, but confesses to being vindictive. Elsa is compared to Shakespeare's Juliet, but a Juliet who survived the death of her Romeo and was left feeling numb and dead inside. During their first interview, Poirot notes this numbness, indifference, and disinterest. In the sixteen years that have passed, Elsa has married and divorced several successful and wealthy men (she is described as a hero-

worshiper for her choice of partners) and is currently married to Lord Dittisham, but does not seem happy or satisfied with her life. In the end, she is revealed to be Amyas's true killer. In his review of the novel, Mark Wallace points out her character being "linked to social mobility," with her humble background and lack of "class," which cannot be imbedded by education, to be crucial for both the perception of her character by others, as well as her destiny in the novel.

Cecilia Williams, the former governess of Caroline Crale's younger sister Angela Warren, is a portrayal of both a working-class woman and a feminist. Although she is described as a "grim tartar of a governess" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 252), she is also noted to be "a very efficient and intelligent woman" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 245). The text also stresses Miss Williams's traditional, Victorian upbringing, especially in her views on marriage as a union, but it is her views of how men should treat women and her animosity toward men that made other characters see her as a feminist, equating feminism with misandry: "From her spinster's, governess's life, there rose up a blast of fierce feminism. Nobody hearing her speak could doubt that to Miss Williams Men were the Enemy!" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 136). Furthermore, her Victorian and Edwardian views are made apparent in her opinion on topics such as proper parenting – she supports the detached form of parenting such as the one Christie herself had, which was a characteristic of the mentioned eras: "Many children, most children, I should say, suffer from over-attention on the part of their parents. . . . The best thing for a child, I am convinced, is to have what I should term healthy neglect on the part of both its parents" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 134). Her portrayal, however, is not as negative as that of Mrs Otterbourne, who was considered a horrible creature by the majority of the characters in the novel, which could be due to Poirot's approval of her Victorian upbringing. Poirot notes that despite apparently having "no assets of which to boast," "there was no despondency there and no sense of failure. Miss Williams's life had been interesting to her – she was still interested in people and events. She had that enormous advantage of a strict Victorian upbringing denied to us these days" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 149).

Angela Warren, Caroline Crale's younger half-sister, is one of the finest examples of a positive characterization of career women, as well as the most successful one in all four novels. She is only thirteen at the time of her sister's death and is depicted as a rather difficult child, spoilt by her sister and often fighting for her attention with her brother-in-law Amyas. An incident when she was a baby left Angela blind on one eye and with a scar on her face,

and her sister Caroline, who caused it, felt guilty for the rest of her life. At the time of Poirot' investigation, Angela is a successful architect, whose lecture at the Royal Geographical Poirot attended and enjoyed, describing her delivery as "dry, precise, clear, lucid and highly technical," with no "concessions to romantic appeal or love of adventure" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 148). Additionally, he notes a few of her physical and character traits usually attributed to men in the earlier decades, such as her intelligent deductions, the "clear cut precision of her mind" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 150), "very square shoulders and a slightly mannish walk" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 149) and "just as sufficient *nuance* of the *femme formidable* about her to alarm him as a mere man" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 150), which made him confident in taking a more earnest approach to the matter of his visit to her and getting right to the point. He considers her good looking despite her scar, her good looks being a result of the confidence she grew to possess over time: "Poirot believed he saw a spirit strengthened by its necessary fight for confidence and assurance. The undisciplined schoolgirl had given place to a vital and forceful woman, a woman of considerable mental power and gifted with abundant energy to accomplish ambitious purposes. She was a woman, Poirot felt sure, both happy and successful" (Christie, *Five Little Pigs* 150). Merja Makinen argues that this assurance of Angela being happy and satisfied with her life and career is a way of reassuring the reader that she "is not a secondary, pitiful fall-back of a woman who could not get a husband" (*Investigating* 89) because of her physical "flaw." Despite the textual implications making her the prime suspect for Amayas's murder (even her sister is revealed to have thought her guilty and tried to protect her) until the novel's very climax, this turns out to be only a red herring, and Angela a positive character. Apart from being a successful career woman, she truly loved her sister, never doubting Caroline's innocence and never blaming her for the tragic incident that left her scarred.

3.5. Women Characters in *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952)

This post-Second World War novel, subtly depicting social, cultural, and political changes of the time and its influence on the characters, features around two dozen female characters, some of whom are only mentioned or appear briefly, and none of which can be singled out as protagonist. Because of a large cast of characters, in this novel, more than in any of the previously analyzed, the characters are seemingly the least developed and the most stereotypical. Set in a small village of Broadhinny, the novel mostly depicts the characters of

housewives of different ages while the career women are from the city. However, as in every Christie's novel, even the housewives have their secrets. The topics this novel touches upon include the changes and lack of domestic help after World War II and the portrayal of women in the newspaper.

Mrs Ariadne Oliver is the most significant female character featured in this novel when considering Christie's opus as a whole. This novel marks the third out of eight appearances of the famous crime fiction writer considered by many theorists to be Agatha Christie's fictional alter ego because of the many similarities the two of them share. According to Richard Hack, "Mrs. Oliver, with her gray hair, love of apples, and dislike of crowds, was Agatha Christie wrapped in the gauze of a feminist" (149). Mrs Oliver is an elderly lady, the author of many best-sellers featuring a Finn detective Sven Hjerson and she is, in this particular novel, working on a stage-play script of one of her novels with the young playwright Robin Upward while at the same time hating all of his adaptation ideas. Furthermore, she dislikes people and social interaction, which she considers a characteristic of all writers: "Authors were shy, unsociable creatures, atoning for their lack of social aptitude by inventing their own companions and conversations" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 185). All of the above listed character traits can be attributed to Agatha Christie as well.

However, the character of Ariadne Oliver is not an exact replica of Christie and it is not until *McGinty* that Christie started using Oliver as a means through which she expressed her own thoughts about and discontent with her profession and the fame that came with it. She drafted this novel after her Westmacott pseudonym, which she had thus far used to write her more personal thoughts, feelings and doubts, was uncovered and she could no longer hide behind it. Thus, this is the point where Oliver becomes more of a fictional alter-ego than a mere stereotype of a woman writer of the Golden Age. However, even at this point there are certain differences between the two ladies, the most significant one being the depiction of Oliver as a feminist who frequently verbalized her assertion that a woman should be the head of Scotland Yard (Bernthal 59).

The "female intuition," a very popular term in the early twentieth century crime writing, is another object of Christie's satire. Namely, in *Mrs McGinty's Dead,* Oliver tries to snoop around the town to find out who the murderer is and later reports her findings and conclusions to Poirot. She adds that the basis of her conclusion is "female intuition," which arouses skepticism in Poirot, who does not take her suggestions seriously. Furthermore, Poirot

mentions Mrs Oliver's frequent changes of heart when it comes to picking potential culprits, referring to their previous encounter in *Cards on the Table*. However, Merja Makinen points out this to be a textual inconsistency, since Mrs Oliver's suspect Dr Rendell, despite not being the killer of Mrs McGinty, is revealed to have tried to push Poirot under the train and is suspected of murdering his first wife, proving Mrs Oliver did point to a person capable of committing a murder, just like she did in *Cards* (*Investigating* 51).

Mrs McGinty, as the title suggests, is the first murder victim, murdered a few months prior to Poirot's visit to Broadhinny to investigate her murder. She was an old lady who lived a normal and common life and had no secrets of her own. She was also a charwoman working for many families of the village, often taking time to snoop around their houses. The families she worked for, despite some of them having live-in maids, highly relied on her daily domestic services, often remarking how hard it was to find competent domestic workers.

Poirot soon discovers the reason for her murder was that she found a newspaper article about four "Women Victims of Bygone Tragedies," recognized one of them, and sent a letter to the newspaper asking what she could get in return for the picture or information. The said article contains short descriptions of four women involved in four different crimes, which proves to be a crucial lead for Poirot in determining the suspects in the McGinty case: "*Eva Kane, the 'other woman' in the famous Craig Case. Janice Courtland, the 'tragic wife' whose husband was a fiend in human form. Little Lily Gamboll, tragic child product of our overcrowded age. Vera Blake, unsuspecting wife of a killer*" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 73). The cited paragraph exemplifies the novel's accurate depiction of the often-inaccurate newspaper coverage and portrayal of female criminals, including murderers. As the title of the article suggests, the four women in question are victimized, being described as innocent bystanders or victims of ruthless male villains. This is, however, proved to be untrue, and even the author of the article confesses it to consist of more reader-appealing fiction than facts, suggesting that these women were either accomplices, masterminds or executors of the said crimes. Merja Makinen also examines this topic, providing an analysis of the portrayal of female murderers in two different newspapers of the time and concluding that the fictional *Daily Comet*'s victimization of convicted female criminals is correspondent to that of the *Daily Mirror*, the more conservative newspapers of the two analyzed (*Investigating* 154).

Poirot soon narrows down the four women to two – Eva Kane and Lily Gamboll. There are two elderly women and four younger women in the households in which McGinty

worked, leading Poirot to believe one of them might be Eva Kane, who would be in her sixties, or either Lily Gamboll or Eva's daughter, who would both be in their early thirties.

The first of the four younger women is Maureen Summerhayes who, together with her husband, Major Summerhayes, runs the guesthouse in which Poirot stays during his visit. Being a housewife trying and failing in running a household, she is another character that makes the changes in housekeeping evident. Poirot remarks about her terrible cooking and her untidiness, while other villagers observe she knows nothing about running a Guest House. She is not used to not having the servants the Summerhayes used to have in India, where they lived before. Despite this, she is generally considered a sympathetic and "charming creature" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 87). She publicly reveals to be adopted, and sharing this information almost gets her framed for murder. The second woman of the same age is Shelagh Rendell, "a thin fair-haired pale woman" with "very pale blue eyes" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 89), the wife of the local doctor. She is tongue-tied and apprehensive around Poirot, because she suspects there is another reason for him being in the village, about which she confronts him. It is later revealed that she thought Poirot was there to investigate her husband, who was once accused of poisoning his first wife, and Shelagh received several anonymous letters on the matter. Next there is Eve Carpenter, the young and attractive wife of the politician Guy Carpenter, who was known as a poor war widow before marrying him. She is a fair-haired blue-eyed woman who wears red lipstick and an expensive, exotic perfume. Poirot first suspects her of being Lily Gamboll, noticing she is nearsighted, despite not wearing glasses. In the novel's denouement, it is revealed that, before marrying Guy, "she had been a taxi dancer – and a bright girl with plenty of men friends!" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 272). Lastly, there is Deirdre Henderson, the epitome of "the repressed plain girl whom nobody notices" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 140), further described as "large and awkward" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 91) and "simple to the point of gaucheness" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 92). She lives with her mother, Edith Wetherby and her stepfather, whom she strongly dislikes. Noticing the mutual fondness between her and James Bentley, the young man wrongly convicted for Mrs McGinty's murder, Poirot once again decides to play matchmaker. One of the most important things she and Bentley have in common is their love and respect for their respective mothers. Deirdre, who worked as a VAD during the war, is very protective of her mother and takes care of her.

Mrs Wetherby, Deirdre's mother, is the first of the two women suspected to be Eva Kane. Poirot describes her as "a woman who had travelled a good deal" (Christie, *Mrs*

McGinty's Dead 93) and as someone who wanted to seem small and fragile, especially in front of her daughter, so as to appear too weak to do any housework. Deirdre remarks she is a "frightfully sensitive" woman who "can't even read detective stories" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 95) and is disturbed by things such as robberies, violence, and murder. However, she is essentially lazy, manipulative toward her daughter, and is compared to the kind of mothers who eat their young.

The second woman, and the one Poirot considers more likely to commit murder, is Laura Upward, a wealthy "vigorous looking woman of sixty-odd" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 104) in a wheelchair who lives with her son Robin. Unlike Mrs Wetherby, who acts more ill than she is and likes being taken care of, Mrs Upward, despite her poor health, likes being independent and dreads the possibility of having a permanent nurse to look after her. During a debate about how heredity and environment influence a person's character, she states that "[e]nvironment can give a veneer – no more. It's what's bread in people that counts" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 149). Poirot considers her sensible and intelligent but also a ruthless and selfish woman. When she recognizes one of the pictures from the article Poirot shows to a group of villagers, she tries to mislead Poirot by pointing to the wrong picture, adding she does not remember where she had seen it. Despite Poirot's attempts to convince her to tell him the truth because her life might be in danger, she refuses, saying she dislikes rushing things and has to think everything through before acting. Not long after, she becomes the second murder victim and Ariadne Oliver discovers her body upon returning from the theatre with Robin. Her views of heredity turn out to be what motivated her adopted son to kill her. Robin, who turns out to be Eva Kane's son, tries to use heredity as an excuse for committing two murders, stating murder is in his blood.

There are also two interesting women characters who can be described as "modern" or "career women." The first is Miss Pamela Horsefall, the author of the newspaper article. She appears only briefly in the novel when Poirot visits her to ask her about the letter Mrs McGinty sent to the paper. Her physical appearance is the first thing that differentiates her from other women in the novel, being described as manly: "Miss Horsefall was tall, manly-looking, a hard drinker and smoker, and it would seem, looking at her, highly improbable that it was her pen which had dropped such treacly sentiment in the *Sunday Comet*. Nevertheless it was so" (Christie, *Mrs McGinty's Dead* 79). She also sits astride a chair, is busy and impatient, and admits her article to be a "romantic farrago from beginning to end," describing two of the women in the article as "a thorough little bitch" and a gold-digger who stayed with

her “sadistic pervert” of a husband because of his money, respectively (Christie, *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* 82).

The second career woman, more significant to the plot, is Maude Williams, an attractive young secretary. She is one of the first female characters Poirot meets and interviews, describing her as “a very healthy young woman” with “determinedly golden hair” and “a full buxom figure that Poirot approved” of, “by nature dark haired, but not one to be dictated by nature” (Christie, *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* 48). He is bewildered by the discovery that this “admirable,” “quick-witted” (Christie, *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* 172) young woman is romantically interested in her former coworker, the unattractive James Bentley, and even more so when he realizes Bentley is not interested in her. She offers Poirot her help in solving the case, and upon his request, she assumes the vacated position of a maid at the Wetherbys’ in order to find potential evidence that would help Bentley. In the end, it is revealed that she had another motive for infiltrating the village of Broadhinny – she is the daughter of Alfred Craig, the man Eva Kane worked for and had an affair with, and was searching for Eva Kane, the woman who destroyed her family. She confesses to Poirot she wanted to take revenge and went to Mrs Upward’s house, thinking her to be Eva Kane, but found her already dead. Since she committed no crime in the end, Poirot lets her go freely.

4. Stereotypes or Diverse Femininities?

Due to her novels being far more plot driven, with the mystery and detection as the center point, Agatha Christie's characters are generally considered two-dimensional, stereotypical, and often even caricatures. Vipond, however, argues that her characters have at least half a dimension more than they are usually considered to have: "The little bit of fun gently poked at the 'typical' figure, the slightly surprising and contradictory quality, the merest touch of real humanity – all make Christie's types just a bit more than cardboard puppets dancing to the choreography of the plot" (119).

The early 1990s saw a rising number of critics reviewing Christie's novels and characters in terms of gender, with feminist critics offering feminist reassessments of her works – a trend that continued into the twenty-first century. These include the works of authors such as Gillian Gill, Alison Light, Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, among others, in the nineties, Susan Rowland and Merja Makinen in the early 2000s, or Melissa Schaub and J.C. Bernthal in the 2010s. Gill and Makinen both agree that Christie's female characters challenge patriarchal prescriptions of the time while Schaub, evaluating Christie among other Golden Age women writers, goes as far as claiming "the Golden Age mystery novel by female authors like Agatha Christie . . . can shape its readers into feminists" (ix).

Makinen's 2006 study *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* offers the most extensive analysis of Christie's female characters and the different femininities they represent to date. Makinen categorizes Christie's women into four categories based on femininities available to women at the time: "intrepid young adventurers," referring to the vivacious, courageous, resourceful and active women, including the boyish flapper stereotype; "career women," including women dedicated to a range of professions, not necessarily eminent; "women outside the familial norms," including illegitimate daughters, unmarried mothers, mothers who abandon their families, mistresses and lesbians; and "new forms of domesticity," where more traditional Victorian and Edwardian conventions of domesticity are replaced by marriage of more equal partners, the ideal of "true comradeship," or the "semi-detached marriage," in which partners often spend much time apart, as well as the anti-domestic wives. She dedicates separate chapters to "women behaving badly," including female villains, such as murderers, thieves, and criminal masterminds.

Although her chapters on the types of femininities include the analyses of a large number of Christie's female characters that fit into these categories, including some of the

characters from the four above analyzed novels, she focuses mostly on the main or more prominent characters form each novel (e.g. *Brown*'s Anne and Suzanne, *Death*'s Jacqueline, *Five*'s Angela Warren, and *McGinty*'s Maureen Summerhayes).

If the rest of the characters analyzed in the previous chapter were to be categorized into Makinen's categories, many would fit perfectly into one or more while others would be harder to categorize. Apart from Anne Beddingfield and Suzanne Blair in *The Man in the Brown Suit*, it could be argued that, if she were a protagonist, *McGinty*'s Maude Williams would also fit the category of young adventurers, considering her activity and resourcefulness, as well her flamboyance. As a secretary, she also fits the category of career women, as do many other characters in her novel. Pamela Horsefall is a successful newspaper journalist, Ariadne Oliver a successful writer, while for Mrs McGinty it could be argued she made somewhat of a career as a housekeeper, due to the after-war crisis over domestic workers. Furthermore, *Five Little Pigs'* Angela Warren is arguably the most successful of them all, being a renowned archeologist, while Cecilia Williams is a competent governess, and *Death on the Nile's* Miss Bowers just as competent a nurse, making Salome Otterbourne the only career woman to have an entirely negative depiction and a tragic ending. Elsa Greer and Jacqueline de Bellefort both fit the categories of mistresses of married men and that of female murderers. Coincidentally, both are in a way spared by Poirot instead of facing trial. This, although characteristic for Poirot, who sometimes makes the same exceptions for the male characters as well, is not the norm for Christie. Makinen notes her oeuvre contains a number of female murderers being held accountable and punished for their crimes. Furthermore, while Makinen argues that mistresses carry "much more textual negativity" (101), both of these characters receive a degree of either sympathy or pity from Poirot, while Linnet Doyle, the wealthy heiress who "steals" her best friend's fiancée, seems to be the one he judges the most. The two travel novels contain the characters of competent female thieves – Nadina, the seductress, and the society lady Joanna Southwood. Furthermore, there is an array of married women and housewives, some more traditional, others more modern. *McGinty*'s Maureen Summerhayes is the 1950s version of the incompetent housewives Anne complains about in *Brown*, but unlike them, Maureen is a sympathetic character. *Brown*'s Suzanne Blair represents the modern, more independent wives living in a semi-detached marriage. Furthermore, single, unmarried women of different ages also appear. The older ones, usually governesses or nurses (Miss Williams, Miss Bowers), are often said to be "sexually repressed." Two younger women, around thirty, are described as big, plain, simple, or

clumsy-looking – Deirdre Henderson and Cornelia Robson, both of whom are paired off in the end. There are three characters explicitly or implicitly depicted as feminists – Cecilia Williams, Ariadne Oliver, and Salome Otterbourne. The latter is the only one of the three disliked by everyone, while Williams is respected for her intelligence and professionalism, and Oliver provides more of a comic relief, not being taken too seriously.

Furthermore, Christie's novels often feature characters expressing their views about women based on generally accepted gender stereotypes of their milieu, most often noticeable in the dialogues between the characters. Many scholars, including Vipond and Makinen, agree that such comments should not always be read as Christie's own views.

There are also many scholars who do not dispute Christie's use of stereotypes, but argue that she uses them as a device in plotting her novels, in order to mislead the readers, while Makinen adds that "Christie consistently problematizes attempts to stereotype what constitutes as femininity" (*Investigating* 118). Therefore, the answer to the title question of this chapter seems to be – both. They are not mutually exclusive and this is essentially only a matter of perception. Christie depicts a large variety of different femininities and social roles for women, which then assume different roles in the novel. An elderly spinster can be a sleuth, a victim, a murderer, a witness or a suspect, and the same applies to modern young women, dutiful housewives or successful career women, as well as to any of the other character types. Though often thin and stereotypical, due to the constraints of the genre, Christie often implies and later reveals that most of the characters presented have something to hide and are, therefore, not only what they seem at first sight.

Conclusion

This paper provides an in-depth analysis of only a small fragment of Christie's impressive, extensive oeuvre, more specifically, four novels. However, based on the female characters Christie constructed in these novels, as well as additional literary works written by scholars interested in the matter, several conclusions can be made about the women characters in Agatha Christie's detective novels.

Firstly, regardless of her own views, Christie was able to depict a large variety of women in her novels. These include characters of different ages, social status and professions, who assume different roles in the plot. She often depicts the sociocultural clash between the more conservative characters of Victorian worldviews and the more liberated, modern women of the time. Secondly, her women characters are usually more active, are allowed to behave badly, and be held accountable for it. Many scholars note the high number of female villains, including murderers, in her novels, but their interpretations of this fact differ. Although two of the four novels analyzed in this paper show instances where Poirot spares such women in one way or another, other scholarly works provide the examples of such women being brought to justice and punished for their deeds in the same way as their male counterparts. Contrary to the claims of many twentieth-century critics, career women are usually not portrayed negatively. The character types that mostly do receive a more negative portrayal are usually mistresses, while feminists are usually either disliked or mocked, though not always. Thirdly, in the four analyzed novels, she discusses different themes related to women and gender dynamics, such as marriage, love and motherhood, among others. Finally, her often criticized thinness of characterization can be explained by regarding this as Christie's following the rules of the clue-puzzle format. Similarly, she cleverly utilizes stereotypes as a plot device to misguide the readers. As people do in real life, her characters often judge others based on prejudices and remark that someone is or is not "the type" to do something, which does not always turn out accordingly. By claiming that everyone has something to hide and that anyone can be the murderer, she suggests that there is more to every character than meets the eye, and what the limitations of the format allow her to show, as is true for real people.

However, what stands out the most in regard to her women characters is her depiction of women in a sociocultural context of the inter-war and post-Second-World-War Britain. This makes Christie's female characters not only relevant and worthy of research for the critics and scholars, but also interesting to the casual Christie readers of today.

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