



Universidad de Valladolid

FACULTAD DE FILOSOFÍA Y LETRAS
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Could women investigate crimes? Agatha Christie´s female detectives

Alicia Fernández Cuadrado

Tutor: Dra. Berta Cano Echevarría

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Abstract

Detective fiction has been represented in English literature by many different authors. One of the most famous and best-selling English authors of detective fiction was Agatha Christie (1890-1976), widely known as “The Queen of Crime and Mystery”. Christie did not only introduce male detectives in her novels and short stories but also females. But, to what extent have these characters of female detectives been studied and analyzed? This paper is mainly focused on an analysis of Christie’s female characters in the novels *The Murder At The Vicarage* (1929), *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1930) and *N or M* (1941). An analysis of Christie’s Miss Marple, Bundle Brent and Tuppence Beresford, not only as female detectives but as archetypes of detective fiction as well, will be provided. Furthermore, the paper will contain a comparison between the three female detectives, their different personalities in the novels and their different detection methods, both professional and amateur.

Keywords: Detective fiction, Agatha Christie, female detectives, crime fiction, best-seller, professional detective, amateur detective.

Resumen

La ficción detectivesca ha sido representada en la literatura inglesa por muchos autores diferentes. Una de las autoras de ficción detectivesca inglesa más famosas y vendidas fue Agatha Christie (1890-1976), ampliamente conocida como “La Reina del Crimen y el Misterio”. Christie no sólo introdujo detectives masculinos en sus novelas y relatos, sino también femeninos. Pero, ¿hasta qué punto han sido estos personajes de detectives femeninas analizadas y estudiadas? Este artículo se centra principalmente en el análisis de los personajes femeninos de Christie en las novelas *El asesinato en la vicaría* (1929), *El misterio de las siete esferas* (1930) y *N o M* (1941). Se analizará a Miss Marple, Bundle Brent y Tuppence Beresford, no sólo como mujeres detectives sino también como arquetipos de la ficción detectivesca. Además, el artículo contendrá una comparación entre las tres mujeres detectives, sus diferentes personalidades en las novelas y sus diferentes métodos de detección, tanto profesionales como aprendices.

Palabras clave: Ficción Detectivesca, Christie, detectives femeninas, crímenes, superventas, profesional, aprendiz.

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1. INTRODUCTION: DEFINING DETECTIVE FICTION

Detective fiction is closely related to crime fiction, but what is the main difference between them? Are they exactly the same? Not really: “the main difference between both genres is the murder: detective fiction does not always have a murder involved, while crime fiction does not only contain murder (or murders), but murder is its main component” (Rzepka 10). In regards to the elements that one can find in a detective novel these are: the detective (or detectives), a mystery, an investigation and what is known as “the puzzle element”, by which the reader has to solve the crime and proves his or her own reasoning abilities (Rzepka10). Moreover, if we ask ourselves what is detective fiction, one definition would be “any story that contains a major character undertaking the investigation of a mysterious crime, or similar transgression” (Rzepka 12).

In regards to the classic detective novel, the poet W.H. Auden defined it as the following: “The basic formula is this: a murder occurs; many are suspected; all but one suspect, who is the murderer, are eliminated; the murderer is arrested or dies” (Auden147). Furthermore, it is important to highlight that the main interest of detective fiction, or at least one of them, remains in the fact that the reader can participate in the game of discovering the culprit: “In short, the reader remains an observer . . . with a clear conscience and a puzzle to solve” (qtd in Norell 185).

Edgar Allan Poe (1809-49) is considered to be “the grandfather of modern crime and detective fiction” (Medawar 9), especially with *The Crimes of the Rue Morgue*, in 1841. He was later followed in England by authors such as Arthur Conan Doyle and, later, Agatha Christie.

Furthermore, one has to state that the first English novel to feature a professional detective protagonist is considered to be *Richmond, or Scenes in the Life of a Bow Secret Officer*, published in 1827, attributed variously to Thomas Skinner Surr and Thomas Gaspey. This novel, narrated in the first person by the professional detective Richmond, makes a difference if we compare it with Christie’s novels, in which the detective (Poirot or Miss Marple) are the detectives but not the narrators of the story. The Golden Age of Detective Fiction, thus, is considered to be the period between the end of World War I in 1918, and the beginning of World War II in 1939 (Stewart 1).

To sum up, the reader of detective fiction normally has the impression of being trapped in a game in which he or she has to participate indirectly in order to solve the crime. However, the mysterious or “puzzle” element is usually kept from beginning to end. In Christie’s case, for example, the murderer or culprit’s identity is not revealed until the very end of the story. This makes one read the whole story in order to solve the mystery, such as in the three novels selected: *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925), *The Murder At the Vicarage* (1930) and *N or M* (1941), where all of Christie’s female detectives Bundle, Miss Marple and Tuppence make their appearance. The reason for choosing these novels responds mainly to the fact that, in the three of them, the female detectives are deeply depicted and psychologically characterized, because they are the protagonists in charge of solving the mystery.

2. MALE DETECTIVE ARCHETYPES

What is a literary archetype? A character that performs specific actions and roles, in this case the role of the detective, that is, someone who has to solve a mystery and, most of the cases as well, investigate a crime (or more than one). In the case of detective fiction, one can see both male and female detectives, as well as both male and female authors.

Regarding male detectives, one of the earliest to appear in English detective fiction in the late 19th century, concretely in *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) is A. Conan Doyle’s best known detective, Sherlock Holmes. “Holmes, the Thinking Machine of reason, rationality and ego, is a narrow beam of light” (Blackwell 7), contrasts a lot with another famous detective, Father Brown, created by G. K Chesterton. Father Brown, a naïve and apparently innocent priest, appears first in Chesterton’s short story *The Blue Cross* (1910). However, both of them, as well as Agatha Christie’s most famous male detective, Hercule Poirot, have something in common: the ability to solve mysteries without almost anyone’s help (in the case of Holmes, Watson’s help is more a company than a help to solve the crime).

Sherlock Holmes, however, does not only catch murderers or crime’s culprits, but he also “solves thefts, frauds, cases of mistaken identity, and petty crimes, as much as he

catches killers”(Lanchester 5). Holmes, who constantly acts through reason and logic, has a method “based on the science of deduction and analysis” (Navajas 30). Also, the fact that Holmes appears to know very well his own intellectual capacities: “Thus, the reason why Holmes solves crimes is pure pleasure, since it is a challenge for his intelligence” (Navajas 31). Furthermore, Sherlock Holmes could also be compared to Allan Poe’s famous detective, Auguste Dupin, who, although coined in American literature, was one of the first to open up the genre of detective fiction: “Both detective’s methods are based on the observation of small details that are unremarkable for others” (Navajas 32).

On the other hand, Father Brown, Gilbert Keith Chesterton’s creation, appeared for the first time in *The Innocence of Father Brown* (1911). This detective differs from Holmes and Poirot in the fact that, due to his religious convictions as a priest, he does not see life in the same way as the others do. In fact, it is probably his faith in God what enables him to look at human nature with a, paradoxically, more human gaze: “Nevertheless, what makes Father Brown a great detective is his ability to combine reason with the spiritual” (Navajas 36). Moreover, Father Brown was inspired in a real priest that Chesterton knew in his life: ““the original of Father Brown was Monsignor John O’Connor, a Yorkshire priest and a great friend of Chesterton” (qtd in Navajas 35). Finally, what really makes Father Brown different from Holmes and Poirot is his deep desire to reform the criminals, connected of course with her duties not only as a priest, but also as someone who is used to listen to people’s misfortunes: “his role as priest is indispensable since what he seeks is their repentance” (Navajas 36). Thus, Father Brown is not as sentimentally cold as Poirot or Holmes could be, due to the lack of objectivism found in a priest’s job.

Hercule Poirot, in contrast to Brown and Holmes, is depicted as a self-conscious, even arrogant, professional detective (concretely Private Investigator Police Officer). He was created by Christie when she was already a very famous writer. Poirot wants to know everything, as a good detective usually does, and his method is based on constantly asking questions, rather than taking anything for granted: “When Poirot is going to solve a case, his method consists in asking questions to witnesses and the suspects” (Navajas 33). In the novel *Cards on the table* (1936), a Superintendent called Battle tells Poirot that he is not always right, to which he answers: “I am. Always I am right. It is so invariable that it startles me” (qtd in Schwanebeck 54). Hercule Poirot appears in 33 novels and 54 short

stories written by Christie, such as the famous *Murder in the Orient Express* (1934), written during the Golden Age of Detective Fiction. The three male detectives constitute archetypes of the English detective, and, not only that, but of the male detective as well. Moreover, one has to take into account as well that, while Father Brown appears more as a great expert of human nature (something that occurs with Christie's Miss Marple, as well, because both are older than Holmes and Poirot), Holmes and Poirot appear to move better in the logic sphere, that is, rational thinking more than human nature. Finally, regarding their appearances in the author's novels, Holmes appears in 60 of Conan Doyle's stories, and Father Brown appears in 53 of Chesterton's short stories (Britannica). The only difference in these terms is that Poirot appears mostly in novels, while the other two detectives make their appearance in short stories. Another difference between Poirot and Holmes is that, unlike Holmes, Poirot does not depend economically on his job as a detective, but he is rather devoted to it: "Although he does not depend economically as much on being a detective as Sherlock Holmes does, investigation constitutes "one of my [his] tasks in life" (qtd in Navajas 33).

Finally, another archetype of the male detective, also created by Agatha Christie, and that is relevant for this dissertation, is Tommy Beresford. Together with his wife Prudence (Tuppence), the couple take care of their children and solve mysteries together. In this case, Tommy could be considered a different type of male detective than Holmes, Poirot or Brown not only by the fact that he is married, but also because Tommy, unlike the others, appears to be more devoted to his wife than to his work (or maybe to both). In *N or M*, their daughter Debora says "I know that you and Carrot Top (Tommy) are devoted to each other" (184).

3. WOMEN AS DETECTIVES: FEMALE DETECTIVE ARCHETYPES

However, male detectives are not the only ones found within the detective genre. If one pays attention to female detective authors, such as Dorothy L. Sayers or Agatha Christie, one can easily find different archetypes of the female detective. On the one hand, we have the figure of the "flapper". A flapper is "*specifically* : a young woman of the period of

World War I and the following decade who showed freedom from conventions (as in conduct” (Merriam Webster). The *flapper*, then, follows the ideal of a young, free woman who decides by her own self what she wants, and what she does not want, all the time: “Independent or eccentric female heroines, modelled on the new woman or the flapper, are featured” (Mezei, 105). Within this category of the flapper one can include Dorothy L Sayer’s Harriet Vane or Agatha Christie’s Bundle Brent, and, at some point before she is married in the novel *The Secret Adversary* (1922), Tuppence Beresford. Sayer’s Harriet Vane is not really a female detective, but a female writer of detective fiction, so she is also related with crime and detectives. Harriet Vane first appeared in Sayer’s *Strong Poison* (1930), and later helps Sayer’s most famous male detective, Lord Peter Wimsey, to solve a murder. On the other hand, Christie’s Bundle Brent (in full Lady Eileen) challenges the ideal of the flapper when she finally marries her friend, Bill Eversleigh (*The Seven Dials Mystery*).

On the other hand, and contrasting with this archetype of the flapper, one can describe another archetype of the female detective: the spinster. The spinster can be exemplified in Christie’s Miss Jane Marple as its best example, but also in Wentworth’s Miss Silver and Young’s Miss Mole. (qtd in Mezei 105). However, the old, innocent spinster is not that anymore, because female detectives such Christie’s Miss Marple clearly challenge this idea. On the one hand, Miss Marple knows a lot about human nature, and, on the other, she has the ability to solve mysteries and crimes without being a professional detective (and, sometimes, even better than them). Regarding the domestic space, it is very important in the case of female detectives such as Christie’s Miss Marple or Young’s Miss Mole: for example, Miss Marple spends almost all the time in her house in the village of St. Mary Mead, but in her garden she can see everything she needs in order to obtain the proper conclusions. It is precisely this ability of knowing everything what makes people (concretely the neighbours in the village) to sometimes avoid Miss Marple’s company. Also, it is important to highlight that both Miss Marple and Hannah Mole made their first appearance in 1930, the first in Christie’s *Murder At the Vicarage*, and the second in Young’s *Miss Mole*, something that enables one to think about the social status of women at the time, and specially of old women who were not married and devoted themselves to looking at people’s lives. This is important at the period, since during WWI so many young men died that many girls could not marry in the years after the war. “The spinster, object of ridicule, invective, and pity, has been a recurring icon in British

literature” (Mezei, 104) but, of course, the spinster’s role as detectives is obviously more than gossiping and looking at people’s lives, because, in the end, they show their detective abilities and make people think that they are more intelligent than they seem, something that makes one turn into the puzzle element that detective fiction always have to have: surprise. Also, as well as the house is a key element for the old spinsters such as Miss Marple or Miss Mole, the vicarage, with a clear religious significance, plays an important role: on the one hand, it can be the scene of the crime (Christie’s *Murder At the Vicarage*), or it can also be a strong symbol of the repressive nature that, throughout religion, women at the time (specially not married women) were forced to have. Furthermore, another female writer, Ivy Compton-Burnett (1884-1969), depicted in her novel *A House and its Head* (1935) the character of Miss Jekyll, a woman who uncovers a murder. These two different archetypes of the female detective as the young flapper vs the old spinster makes one think about the way in which all these female authors have conveyed the patriarchal ideal of the “male detective” previously stated in detective fiction and, as well, in literature in general: “Miss Mole, Miss Marple, etc, try to restore order to--or even transform - the small domestic and private space” (Mezei 107). Miss Marple and Miss Mole have something in common: “Miss Mole is sharp-tongued, observant, and refuses the abjection and marginalization indicated by her poverty” (Mezei 111). Also, it is very important to take into account the fact that unmarried women at the time, even though they devoted their lives to solving crimes, were considered as inferior, especially by men, in the world of the novel. So here Miss Marple is the only one that challenges that principle without marrying anyone in her whole life as a character: “all the spinsters except Miss Marple are married off at the end” (Mezei 116). As seen in this chapter, female detectives in English fiction have to adapt their needs to the real needs of women at the time, that is, the duality between the public sphere (work as detectives, either professionals or amateurs), and the private sphere (the house and their role as mothers and wives, such as Christie’s Tuppence Beresford).

In regards to Christie’s female detectives, and highlighting that Miss Marple, apart from representing the ideal of the spinster/female detective, is her most famous and probably better developed character (Miss Marple appears in 32 of Christie’s books), one has to state that, apart from this tender old lady, Christie reinforced the ideal of the free woman, not only in her female detectives, but also in characters such as Vera Claythorne (*And Then There Were None* 1939): “Vera can also be understood as an unhappy antidote

to a troubling masculine world” (Warren 61). Not only this character reflects the need of being independent that women had at the time, but is similar to Christie’s female detectives Bundle Brent and Tuppence Beresford. Bundle and Tuppence are young as well as Vera Claythorne, (Bundle is only 19 and Tuppence is a middle-aged woman), and, they are all in constant need of adventures in order to fulfil the bolds of daily life. Furthermore, Vera Claythorne is another archetype of woman of her time because she “displays the qualities of a woman of her age: one fed up with a life and career attached to children, schools, and the home” (Warren 60). Christie also encourages women, through both her female detectives and female characters, to be aware of their own power, not only as detectives, but as women:” Perhaps, Christie dares to suggest, the world needs more women like Vera Claythorne, not fewer” (Warren 61). Prudence Beresford, known by everyone as Tuppence Beresford, appeared for the first time in Christie’s *The Secret Adversary* (1922), and represents the ideal of the female detective that, although married, is free to choose her own way of earning her living. Also, the fact that she shares profession with her husband Tommy Beresford (another of Christie’s detective), enables her to feel understood by him in all senses.

Finally, but not less important, one may mention the fact that, although lots of Christie’s female characters are not professional detectives (and, in other cases, not even amateurs because they just find themselves within a mystery or crime scene), they contribute as well as the detectives to reinforce the ideal of the flapper, or, in other words, of the free woman: Lady Frances in *The Boomerang Clue* (1933), Victoria Jones in *They Came to Bagdad* (1951), Hilary Craven in *Destination Unknown* (1954), or Katherine Gorrigan in *The Pale Horse* (1961), among many others. Christie clearly defies Vladimir Nabokov’s prototype of the “passive heroin”, that is, the female being rescued by the male hero (which does not happen in her novels). Christie’s women “were typical 1920’s flappers (right through to the books of the 1960’s): they smoked, drank, and swore” (Vipond 119). Finally, it is important to state that the first glimpses of change towards women can be seen in Christie’s novels, and that she did not only see women detectives as professionals or amateurs, but rather as adventurous enough to take risks.

4. AGATHA CHRISTIE: A UNIQUE CRIME WRITER

4.1 Agatha Christie's literary production.

Considered as “The Queen of Detective Fiction”, Christie published her first novel in 1920, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the first one in which, as stated above, her famous and intelligent male detective Hercules Poirot made his appearance.

However, not only Poirot was the protagonist of Christie's most famous novels. The spinster Miss Jane Marple, hated and loved at the same time for both her gossips and her wide knowledge of human nature, has appeared in both “Miss Marple Series” and “Miss Marple short story collections”. However, Miss Marple's age is never mentioned, although in the novel *The Mirror Cracked From Side to Side* (1962), Miss Marple decides to stop knitting because of her poor eyesight, a clear symbol that she's getting old. Nevertheless, apart from growing old, Miss Marple's character keeps almost the same throughout all the novels in which she appears: gossip, tender, intelligent and bored, with no big changes. However, although Miss Marple appears to be a very traditional, single woman, she understands the change of mentality in young characters, such as her nephew Raymond or the vicar's young wife, Griselda, in *The Murder At The Vicarage*.

1. First novels: the presentation of Tuppence B. and Miss Marple (1920-1927):

Although her passion for both writing and reading had come, as state above, from her childhood, it was not until 1920 that she was able to publish her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (although she finished writing it two years earlier in 1918), and only two years later in 1922 she introduces the characters of Tommy and Tuppence Beresford in the novel *The Secret Adversary*. Later in 1926 she wrote *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. This first period is very important in Christie's career as a prolific writer because in it she determined that the detective genre was taking the perspective of a female writer. Moreover, during this period of history, also known as the interwar period, Christie had to both surprise and entertain the readers with her novels in order to “forget the horrors of the

war and all types of worries” (Alonso-Cortés 4). Although with her first novel Christie was directly introduced within the detective genre, it was not until 1926 that she achieved fame: with the publication of her novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Christie was able to “obtain an absolute success and finally adopt her husband’s surname as her artistic nickname” (Alonso-Cortés 4). However, it is also in this period when Christie introduces her unique female detective Miss Marple, who appeared first in the short story “The Tuesday Night Club”, published in 1927 in “The Royal Magazine”.

2. Mature period and the importance of the female protagonists (1930-1950):

The first novel in which Miss Marple appears is *The Murder At The Vicarage*, published in 1930, so one can consider that Christie’s mature literary period starts here, taking into account that Miss Marple was Christie’s most famous female detective. From 1930 until the beginning of the Second World War in 1939, Christie wrote lots of novels in which Poirot, Miss Marple and the couple of detectives, Tommy and Tuppence, all appeared, such as *Murder on the Orient Express* in 1934, which was so famous that was adapted several times to the cinema. However, it is in 1939 when Christie wrote “the most valuable of the family treasures” (Warren 51), the novel *And Then There Were None*. This novel has been criticized several times throughout history as racist (because of its original title, *Ten Little Niggers*), but, seen from a very different perspective, it depicts, in the female character of Vera Claythorne, “a provocative critique of masculine authority and immaturity in the early 20th century” (Warren 51). Furthermore, Christie reinforces throughout this novel “a remarkable study of gender and power relations in the interwar years” (Warren 51). Later, when World War II had finished, Agatha decided to write about herself, and as a result of that she published an autobiographic text, *Come Tell Me How You Live*, in 1946, in which she described “her trips to the East with her husband” (Alonso-Cortés, 5). During a historical period of war, poverty and patriarchal values, Christie did not keep indifferent, and tried to make her female characters (either protagonists such as Bundle or Tuppence, or not, such as Vera), to look the most powerful and brave as possible: “Christie’s brand of feminism allows for compassion not only for women as victims but as victimizers” (Warren 54). Probably, her travels with her husband to different parts of the world such as Irak, the East, etc, widened Christie’s mind and enabled her to transmit this into her novels as well: *Death on the Nile* in 1937 and *They*

Came to Baghdad, published in 1951, among others, showed exotic settings that contrasted with Miss Marple's St. Mary Mead or the English landscape. Again, returning to Christie's question of gender as a feminist writer, she was able to give Miss Marple the benefit of the doubt, that is, by the first time in the noir or detective novel, a woman was not given either the role of the defenceless victim, nor the role of the "fatal woman". It is important to distinguish this second period of Christie's literary production from the first one because in the England of the 1930s the main role of women was to take care of the children and to be good wives. Moreover, the fact that Colonel Melchett took credit for discovering the murderer when it was Miss Marple, and not him, who did it, may be important in order to recognize the portrayal of the patriarchal society in which Christie had lived: "Colonel Melchett was impressed by Miss Marple's conclusions, but he was not willing to admit it" (*Murder at the Vicarage* 213).

3. Last years and her *Autobiography* (1950-1976).

During her last period of literary production, Christie spent 15 years writing her *Autobiography*, which was published in 1977, one year after her death: "In April 1950, Christie considered that it was the moment for starting to write an *Autobiography*" (Alonso-Cortés 6). However, she still wrote lots of novels during all those years, such as *A Murder is Announced* (1950), *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), *Endless Night* (1967), *Nemesis* (1971) or *Elephants Can Remember* (1972), among the most famous ones. In *Murder is Announced*, the setting is again a small fictional village, Chipping Cleghorn. In contrast, in *A Caribbean Mystery* the setting totally changes from a peaceful village to the beautiful beaches of the Caribbean. Another hidden topic in Christie's novels is the triumph of love, especially when she marries her second husband, Sir Max, present in the love story that Tuppence and Tommy Beresford lead and also present in her *Autobiography* as well: "She kept loving her husband, even 45 years after their wedding" (Alonso-Cortés 7).

Finally, it is important to highlight too that, although being (still) considered as "The Queen of Mystery and Crime", Christie not only wrote detective or noir novels, but also romantic novels (which could be also included within the popular genre), such as *Absent in the Spring* (1944) or *The Rose and the Yew Tree* (1948), "both of them published

under the pseudonym of “Mary Westmacott” (Alonso-Cortés 6). She was able not only to sell millions of her novel’s copies, but also an endless number of texts, within and without the detective genre: “In total, she produced more than 100 books: 80 detective novels, 17 theatre plays and the rest, romantic novels” (Alonso-Cortés 6). However, she never kept doing what really made her happy or, at least, seemed to: writing. And, more than that, giving life and psychology to all her characters, despite their age, gender or professional occupation. This could probably come from Christie’s own experiences in life, a life that was not pleasant due to her mother’s death and her nervous outbreak:

“It is really a hard life. Men will not be nice to you if you are not good-looking, and women will not be nice to you if you are” (Agatha Christie).

“Miss Marple Series” includes the following novels:

The Murder At the Vicarage (1930),

The Body in the Library (1942),

The Moving Finger (1943),

A Murder is Announced (1950),

They Do It With Mirrors (1952), also published as *Murder with Mirrors*,

A Pocket Full Of Rye (1953),

4.50 from Paddington (1957),

The Mirror Cracked From Side To Side (1962),

A Caribbean Mystery (1964),

At Bertram’s Hotel (1965),

Nemesis (1971),

Sleeping Murder (1976), published the year Christie died.

Miss Marple short story collections include the following:

1. *The Thirteen Problems* (1932)

this collection includes the following short stories:

“The Tuesday Night Club”

“The Idol House of Asarte”

“Ingots of Gold”

“The Bloodstained Pavement”

“Motive v. Opportunity”

“The Thumbmark of St. Peter”

“The Blue Geranium”

“The Companium”

“The Four Suspects”

“A Christmas Tragedy”

“The Herb of Death”

“The Affair at the Bungalow”

“Death By Drowning”

2. *The Regatta Mystery and Other Stories* (1939)

“Miss Marple Tells A Story”

3. *Three Blind Mice and Other Stories* (1950)

“Strange Jest”

“The Case of the Perfect Maid”

“The Case of the Caretaker”

“Tape-Measure Murder”

4. *The Adventure of the Christmas Pudding* (1960)

“Greenshaw’s Folly”

5. *Double Sin and Other Stories* (1961)

“The Sanctuary”

6. *Miss Marple’s final cases and Two Other Stories* (1979), published after Christie’s death.

In regards to Christie’s young “flapper”, Bundle Brent, it is only in two of Christie’s novels where she appears, *The Secret of Chimneys* (1925) and *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929), and her appearances are not as original as Poirot’s or Christie’s, maybe because old characters or, at least, more experienced detectives, appear to be more appealing to the public than a young flapper. Moreover, young characters are almost always present as wild and crazy and more archetypal in a way due to their age and lack of experience in life.

Finally, regarding the couple of Prudence (Tuppence) and Tommy Beresford, Christie wrote this series of novels based on scenarios related with World War II, the Nazi period or European espionage. They were popular because they included issues that, at the time, were lived daily by lots of English (and European) people.

The novels in which the couple appear are the following:

The Secret Adversary (1922),

Partners in Crime (1929),

N or M (1941),

By The Pricking Of My Thumbs (1968),

Postern of Fate (1973).

5. ANALYSIS OF THE FEMALE DETECTIVES

5.1 Miss Jane Marple in “The Murder At The Vicarage”.

First of all, it is important to give account of the novel's reception. Published in 1930, during Christie's 1st literary period, *Murder At The Vicarage* is the first novel in which Miss Jane Marple, the spinster who becomes an amateur detective, makes her appearance. It is precisely in this year, 1930, when Christie met for the first time the archaeologist Sir Max Mallowan, who would later be her second husband. In this novel, both Miss Marple and the Vicar, who narrates the story, show a devotion towards God (especially the Vicar, of course) which, in Miss Marple's case, makes her go to Church not only to pray, but also to keep gossiping about the lives of St. Mary Mead's inhabitants: “Without going out of St. Mary Mead, she has come to know the most unfathomable abysses of the human soul” (Alonso-Cortés 22). Moreover, even the great writer Dorothy L. Sayers congratulated Christie for this novel: “Miss M is lovely ... I think this is the best you have done – almost” (qtd in Alonso-Cortés 23). However, although this is the 1st novel in which Miss Marple appears, it is important to highlight that this character appeared earlier in a short story, *The Tuesday Night Club*, published in December 1927, which later became the first chapter of *Miss Marple and The Thirteen Problems*, 1932. In this collection of stories, Miss Marple, as part of “The Tuesday Night Club”, together with the other members of the club, have to investigate a crime in which 3 people at a dinner have been poisoned, but only one of them died (again, Christie's relationship with poison). Moreover, Miss Marple appears in 12 full novels and 20 short stories (see chapter 4.2 with Miss Marple's list). Although Miss Marple is an old spinster in her 70s, as stated in *At Bertram's Hotel*, she does not feel at all limited by her age when it comes to investigating crimes: “Miss Marple sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke screen” (*The Murder At the Vicarage* 16). Moreover, Miss Marple hides her real passion, solving crimes, with gardening and plants, something that gives her the image of the “kind old lady”. An old lady that, definitely, knows more than everyone else. Also, the fact that Miss Marple is most

of the times (if not always) right, makes people around her feel uncomfortable: “Miss Marple is usually right. That is what makes her unpopular” (*The Murder At the Vicarage* 176).

Regarding *The Murder At The Vicarage* (1930), everything happens in Miss Marple’s village, St. Mary Mead, a fictional village which is supposed to be in England, and the story is narrated by the Vicar, Clement Leonard, Miss Marple’s friend and the one that admires most Miss Marple’s knowledge of human nature: “I stared at the old lady, feeling an increased respect for her mental powers” (77). The novel starts with a crime, as so do most of Christie’s novels (although not all), committed at the vicar’s office; Colonel Protheroe is dead, and the most probable thing is that he has been murdered. Colonel Protheroe, depicted in the novel as “the kind of man who enjoys making a fuss on every conceivable occasion” (7), is disliked by everyone in the village. Moreover, the story starts with the Vicar telling about how everything happened, and talking about how everyone in the village (not only himself) did see Colonel Protheroe: “Anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service” (5). The most important characters of this novel are the vicar and Miss Marple, as the narrator and detective, but also Griselda, the vicar’s wife, Colonel Protheroe (the murdered man), Lettice Protheroe (Colonel’s daughter), Ann Protheroe (Colonel’s wife) and Lawrence Redding (Ann’s secret lover).

As the vicar keeps narrating the events that have happened, one is able to notice that Miss Marple enjoys her “duty” as an amateur detective, and that is probably one of the things that explains why she is the most important detective created by Christie. Unlike the professionals, such as Poirot or, in the case of this novel, Colonel Melchett and Inspector Slack, Miss Marple sees everything from her garden and is therefore able to explain even the most insignificant details: “And she knows every single thing that happens-and draws the worst inferences from it, said Griselda” (8). Griselda, the vicar’s young wife, also admires Miss Marple’s abilities as a sleuth, and, especially, Miss Marple’s certainty that something has (or has not) happened: “She is never mistaken. That kind of old cat is always right” (19). When the story is coming to its end, the vicar and Colonel Melchett listen open-mouthed to Miss Marple’s full account of the crime: how it was committed, who did it and why. However, what appears to be new in this novel in contrast to others written by Christie, is the fact that the culprit is known since the first part of the story, but this person is able to put everyone by his side. Nevertheless, when

Miss Marple discovers everything and tells it to the vicar, his shock is such that he does not know what to say: “She spoke with such certainty that in no other way could the crime have been committed” (212). Also, another important aspect is the fact that, again, the gender issue is at stake. Miss Marple both surprises and makes two men (the vicar and Colonel Melchett) and, as a result of this, Melchett did not want to admit that Miss Marple was totally right: “Your solution is a very plausible one, Miss Marple, but with no shadow of proof” (215). Finally, it is important to highlight that, although Miss Marple’s methods are not professional and she sees most of the things from her garden, all this makes Miss Marple a unique female detective, and a unique detective in general. To conclude, Miss Marple’s method is mainly based on questioning everything, both for herself and for the others, as well as the need of proofs and solid explanations for every single detail: “Miss Marple was a little diffident, but it was clear she had a plan fully outlined” (215). Miss Marple, although being both an old lady and an amateur detective, clearly states the pattern of the female detective as one with both intellectual skills and an understanding of human nature due to her age.

5.2 Bundle Brent in “The Seven Dials Mystery”

The Seven Dials Mystery was published in 1929, one year earlier than *Murder At The Vicarage*, and it depicts for the second time the young and risky Bundle Brent, Lord Caterham’s daughter. Although Bundle appears for the first time in one of Christie’s early novels, *The Secret of Chimneys*, published in 1925, it is in this novel in which Lady Eileen (known by her friends as Bundle), is really depicted as a female detective. In regards of the literary critics, this novel is “the perfect antidote to anyone who has overdosed on the classic English interwar thriller” (McDermid, *The Seven Dials Mystery* 11). However, there is strong criticism about it too: “Christie’s accused of snobbery, insensitivity, racial and class stereotyping” (McDermid, *The Seven Dials Mystery* 10). Unlike *The Murder At The Vicarage*, in *The Seven Dials Mystery* Christie introduced topics with which people at the time felt more identified: “The joint threats of Germany and Communist Russia, house parties and plucky young women” (McDermid, *The Seven Dials Mystery* 7). Moreover, this novel “has all the ingredients of the classic 1920s thriller, as exemplified by Mason, Sapper and Buchan” (McDermid 7). Regarding the novel’s plot, everything happens in Chimneys, an old house that is owned by Lord Caterham. Lord Caterham, an old

aristocrat and also Bundle's father, has rented Chimneys for two years to Lady Coote and Sir Oswald, a married couple. Lady Coote and her husband share the house with a group of young friends (Jimmy Thesiger, Ronny Devereux, Bill Eversleigh and Rupert Bate-man), who are preparing a surprise for their friend Gerry Wade with eight alarm clocks to wake him up. Wade, who "appears to be a champion sleeper" (190), is later found shot by Bundle in the street: "The car never touched him. This man was shot, Bundle- said the doctor" (48). The crime (because everyone suspects it has not been a natural death), happens at the beginning of the novel, and since Bill Eversleigh (Bundle's close friend who is in love with her) tells Bundle about the issue, she is more than decided to take part in the crime's investigation, although Bill has advised her not to do so (Bundle is a young woman and Bill wants to protect her, again the male stereotypical behaviour). However, Bundle does not care: "She must get hold of Bill Eversleigh. To think was to act with Bundle" (39). Also, at the same time, two International secret inventions, created by Sir Herr Eberhard's, had been stolen, and nobody suspected of the real author of the robbery (until the end, when the Seven Dials Club together with Superintendent Battle find it out). Not very interested in International businesses but rather in crimes and adventures, Bundle does not care about Superintendent Battle's opinions and decides to investigate on her own after getting the inspector's refusal for her help: "But if there is a chance for an amateur, let me have it" (86). Eventually, after Bundle is totally lost with all her discoveries and after taking some dangerous risks (such as going to the Seven Dials Club and listen to the conversations hidden inside a cupboard), the real meaning of the Seven Dials Club (not a secret criminal organization but rather a group of crime's investigators) is finally revealed to her by Superintendent Battle. The policeman works with the Seven Dials Club to catch the dangerous crook who has stolen the International inventions: "The man was dangerous and out of big, international stuff, but the Seven Dials stuck to it and succeeded" (269). This crook turns to be the same person who had killed Gerry Wade and Ronny Devereux, because they were going to betray him. In the end, Bundle feels so ridiculous because she has not discovered Wade and Devereux's murderer: "How ghastly", cried Bundle, "If only I had known" (272). However, after a while, Bundle gives up on her sadness from not having able to solve the crime: "I'm very tough and rather lucky" (280).

On the other hand, in regards to the novel's characters, the most important ones are Bundle, Bill Eversleigh, Jimmy Thesiger and Superintendent Battle, who is the one

that really solves the mystery and also discovers the murder's culprit. Less important but still there are Lord Caterham (Bundle's old father and a wealthy man), Lady Coote and Sir Oswald (who rent Chimneys and are an old couple), Gerry Wade, Lorraine Wade (Gerry's step sister), who turns to be not as naïve and good as she was thought, Jimmy Thesiger, and finally, the members of "The Seven Dials Club": Countess Radsky, Mr Mogorovsky (the club's owner), Count Andras from the Hungarian Embassy ("A Secret Anti-Bolshevist Agent in England", 267), Mr. Hayward Phelps (an American journalist) and Ronald Devereux. However, the main character of this novel is Bundle and, in terms of the crime's investigation, Superintendent Battle. The novel is narrated by a third person, omniscient narrator, who knows everything about all the characters but it is only a narrator and not a character (in contrast to *The Murder At the Vicarage*, in which the narrator is the Vicar). Bill is also important because he is Bundle's best friend (and, at the end of the novel, her suitor and future husband), and tries to prevent her all the time from the dangers of investigating crimes (especially for a woman). Jimmy Thesiger, who also investigates by his own, like Bundle, appears to hide a big secret that anyone, until the end, is able to discover.

On the other hand, one must pay attention to the female detective at stake in this novel, Lady Eileen or, as her friends call her, Bundle Brent. Bundle responds to the popular archetype of the "flapper" previously explained, the young and independent woman who does not care about men's opinions and who is not interested in marriage (she is only 19). In the first novel in which this character appears (she only appears in 2 of Christie's novels) Bundle is described as "tall, slim and dark with an attractive boyish face and a very determined manner" (*The Secret of Chimneys* 74). Also, Bundle is depicted as an intimidating woman, especially towards men: "He was a little afraid of the shrewd penetration of her sharp grey eyes" (*The Secret of Chimneys* 118). The female writer and historian Janet Morgan (Lady Balfour of Burleigh), in regards to the character of Bundle Brent, stated that "Christie played with the story as a vehicle for the energetic woman she introduced" (Morgan, *Agatha Christie* 33). The character of the flapper could also be a way for Christie to introduce a different archetype within her female detectives than an old spinster (Miss Marple) or a married woman (Tuppence), but it is also stereotypical in the sense that, at the end of the novel, she marries her friend Bill: "I could just bring myself to marry you, Bill, with a great effort" (261). One of the interesting facts about Bundle is that she is described as intelligent by Bill: "She's a splendid girl, a real good

sport, and, mark you, she's got brains too" (11). The fact that Bundle is described as intelligent by a man is important because it meant that a male character was admitting a female's intellectual capacities, something not common in the literature and films of the time. Also, at the beginning of the novel, when the friends are planning the joke of the clocks for Gerry Wade, Bill wants Bundle's help, because she is usually the one with good ideas: "I wish we'd got Bundle here" (11). Also, another of Bundle's features is the fact that she is always in the need of new adventures: "Being comfortable isn't enough for me. I want excitement" (43), and she is depicted, as well as Miss Marple, as an amateur detective who uses reason instead of intuition: "The real Bundle, cool, efficient and logical" (49). Another personal characteristic of this female character is that she is described as "quick-witted" (87), and also as a very straightforward woman: "I've grasped that. I'm not a fool" (87). Bundle is a character that appears to be very self-confident, but also stubborn: "The grass never did grow under Bundle's feet" (97). Regarding Bundle's abilities as a female detective, one has to highlight that, since the beginning of the novel, she does not care about taking risks (risks especially uncommon for a woman at the time), and she goes alone to the Seven Dials Club, a night club in the story with a not very good reputation, and keeps inside a cupboard secretly: "She fairly gloried in the extreme discomfort of her position" (119). Bundle is very curious and is always keen of looking at the others to find answers: "In this life, Alfred, one never stops learning" (126). Even Jimmy Thesiger, one of the characters who appears to be an unreliable man, admired Bundle's capacities as a detective: "He had the highest respect for Bundle's capabilities" (128). Throughout all the story, one is able to see that Bundle sees crime investigations and mysteries not as a serious issue, but rather as an entertainment: "This sort of things are exciting" (148). Furthermore, Bundle does what she can in order to show men, such as her friend (and later husband) Bill Eversleigh, that she is as equally capable of solving crimes than men: "I'm mixed up in this, and it's no earthly use your bleating about it" (148). Unlike Miss Marple, whose method is based mainly on looking at people and analyse their minds, Bundle's method is mainly based on acting, that is, going to the suspicious places and listen to people's conversations: "the communicating door had been rendered soundproof for her" (119). However, both female detectives are amateur and they both have the need of knowing everything: "You know how keen Bundle is to be in everything" (150). Moreover, when Superintendent Battle tells Bundle that she has to go to bed and not putting herself into trouble, she disobeys him and keeps investigating: "Though she had so far obeyed Battle, Bundle had no intention of going to bed" (161).

Still, it is important to highlight that her age, because she is only 19 years old, makes this character even braver (most of the characters of this age do not dare to do such things). However, it is Superintendent Battle the one in real charge of the crime's investigation and not Bundle, something that makes her feel so ridiculous and, as in Chapter 32's title, "dumbfounded" (268). Nevertheless, although Bundle did not find the culprit, this does not necessarily mean that this character is not (or does not act as) a detective, because detectives do not always find the culprit, they can also be wrong.

Finally, to conclude, the fact that Bundle is depicted as an amateur who does not have the skill to investigate crimes in a deeper way (as Superintendent Battle does), appears to state that she has to learn more about life due to her age but, on the other hand, she has the abilities to do it because she is depicted in the novel as being intelligent enough. The constant need of putting Bundle out of the crime's investigation makes one think that Christie was probably exploring new ways of putting in the paper the gender differences that existed in the 20th's century real life.

5.3 Tuppence Beresford in "N or M"

The third female detective depicted by Christie in her novels is Prudence Beresford, widely known as Tuppence. Together with Tommy Beresford (her husband and also a detective), Tuppence appears in the following Christie's novels:

The Secret Adversary (1922),

Partners in Crime (1929),

N or M (1941),

By The Pricking Of My Thumbs (1968),

Postern of Fate (1973), Christie's last novel but not the last to be published.

Although both Tommy and Tuppence appeared first as blackmailers, they soon turned into detectives because they both found a passion (and also more legality) in that job. Tommy and Tuppence are friends and have known each other for almost their whole

lives, but they soon realize that they have become more than friends. In *N or M*, published in 1941, Tommy and Tuppence have already been married for 20 years and their son Derek, and daughter Deborah, are participating in the Second World War (Derek as aviator and Deborah as a signer interpreter). However, although Tommy works as a detective and is involved in state and international cases, Tuppence, as a woman protected by the others, also participates and does everything she can not to be taken apart from the mysteries. *N or M*, published in 1941, is different from other novels written by Christie because it is a book of international espionage. Regarding its historical context, this novel is based in the year 1939 in England, when World War II had just started, and it incorporates both the mysterious and detective element together with the adventures and troubles that arouse at the time it represented. Some literary critics have stated that, in writing *N or M*, “Mrs Christie shows herself as ingenious as ever” (Punshon, E.R. 3).

The novel starts with Mr Grant, an old friend of Lord Easthampton, asking Tommy to work in an international, secret mission to find out who N and M, two very important Nazi agents, are. Not only N (who is a man) or M (who is a woman) are Nazi agents, but also Hitler’s two most trusted ones. N and M’s mission is mainly “to establish a Fifth Column behind enemy lines” (*N or M* cover page). On the other hand, both N and M “are practised in the art of cunning, deception and murder” (*N or M* cover page), so Tommy has to travel to the South coast of England, concretely to Leahampton, where there was the “red, Victorian villa of Sans Souci” (*N or M* 16) to discover who N and M are. When Grant speaks with Tommy about the international business in which he is going to be involved, Tuppence listens from the door because she has been excluded from Grant’s plans and is not able to work with her husband (because she is a woman and it is dangerous for her). However, Tuppence manages to travel to Sans Souci as well and dresses up as Mrs. Blekenshop, an old woman who does not exist. Tommy discovers that Mrs Blekenshop is his wife, Tuppence, and appears to look amazed by Tuppence’s creativity: “How on earth did you get here, Tuppence?” (20). Later on in the story, Tommy and Tuppence suspect of Carl Von Deinim, a young German, who appears to be innocent at the end, to be the secret agent N, and of Sheila Perenna, the owner of Sans Souci, to be M. None of them are guilty at the end, and Tuppence discovers who N is. When Tuppence is about to rescue Tommy from a trap that someone has set for him, she gets herself caught up in another trap and, with some effort, manages to escape. In the end, Tuppence

and Tommy return to Sans Souci together with Albert, and Tuppence discovers who M is.

Regarding the female character at stake in this novel, Tuppence Beresford, one has to state that is a different type of female detective, in the sense that she is not depicted as the old spinster, neither as the flapper, but rather as a married and, at the same time, powerful and independent woman. She could be included in the category of the flapper, but she is older than Bundle Brent and not so crazy (she can be her mature version). Since the first part of the novel, Tuppence is excluded from the international business in which her husband Tommy is going to work in order to discover N and M's identities, something that makes her both feel angry and sad. This is obviously because of her condition as a woman, yet she is a sleuth as her husband but has to be protected, as Mr. Grant said to Tommy: "You will be offered work. In a prohibited area where your wife cannot accompany you"(10). However, Tuppence does not care about this exclusion and goes to Sans Souci as Mrs Blenkinshop, a married lady. Tommy feels shocked when he discovers Tuppence, and one is able to think that Tommy is depicted as a less intelligent character than his wife or, at least, less audacious. Moreover, Tuppence's intelligence appears remarkable for men: "Yes, she's a smart woman, your wife" (43). When someone kidnapped Tommy, Tuppence was the only one who suspected something: "Tuppence was the only one who knew the kidnapper by sight" (101). Also, Tuppence knew only by talking to her that Sheila Perenna, one of the suspects to be M, that she was not guilty: "Any suspicions Tuppence had died at this moment"(116). Tuppence is also depicted as a nationalist woman who does not support the Irish cause (due to the rivalries at the time between English people and Irish): "Oh, damn, damn the Irish!"(118), something that reinforces the character's need of solving the mystery of N and M in order to help her country. On the other hand, when the Old Miss Minton, one of the characters who was sleeping in Sans Souci as well, told Tuppence about a woman's devotion to her husband, Tuppence got very angry: "Tuppence was feeling far from good tempered" (133). Although married, Tuppence lives a free and independent life both in the private and the public spheres, and her job as a secret sleuth appears to be more like a challenge and as an adventure. Tuppence sees every new mystery as a new opportunity to recover her youth, because in a way, she feels useless: "And now I'm a poor, tiresome, middle-aged woman who won't sit at home quietly and knit as she ought to" (6). This need of new adventures motivates Tuppence in order not to do what women were at the time supposed

to do: stay at home and take care of the children. This character seems to have a duality of both her detective and her female selves, because in front of people, Tuppence never shows her weaknesses, but when she is with Tommy she tells him everything: “I feel so futile, so inexperienced” (144). However, no matter how futile or inexperience she feels because she takes the needed risks and discovers M’s identity at the end: “Tuppence had, sometimes, an uncanny insight” (155). Another character, Albert, Tommy and Tuppence’s college and friend, describes Tuppence as if he admired her: “Mrs Beresford, a nice lady if there ever was one” // “Getting herself mixed up in trouble and looking out for more trouble”// “And how was he going to stop her?, did not look as if he could” (156). In some parts of the novel, Tuppence’s perspicacity and determinacy do not allow Albert or Tommy to contradict her. When Tuppence gets caught into a trap by a young man, Tony, she shows her strong character and that nobody was going to stop her: “Cut out the compliments, I’m admiring myself a good deal so there’s no need for you to chime in” (165). Even Commander Haydock, everything except a fair man, admired Tuppence so much: “I admire your nerve, you know. I admire it very much” (173). To conclude, it is important to highlight that Tuppence’s main method as a detective was based on intuition, and, more than that, on seeing things in the last minute as exactly as they were: “In a flash of bewildering light she saw everything” (176). “She realised at least who was the centre and pivot of the whole organisation” (177). In the last minute, she ironically announces to all the guests in San Souice who really M was: “And now, let me introduce you to M! Yes, I ought to have known it all along” (178). In contrast to Miss Marple and Bundle, Tuppence appears to like being heard by everyone when solving mysteries, but in her private life she is not so self-confident. Nevertheless, excitement is what Christie appears to want her character to feel when she comes to the end and solves everything: “What was really exciting was the way I suddenty saw the whole thing” (181). Moreover, Tuppence takes risks all the time and never gives up.

6. CONCLUSION

On the one hand, after an in-depth analysis of the three novels, what one has to consider is Christie’s depiction of three different female characters, three different female detectives, who are able to solve crimes or, at least, try to do so. It is important to state that

crimes are not always solved in detective novels, neither by male detectives nor by females: In *The Chocolate Box*, Poirot tells Hastings about a crime he was not able to solve, and in *The Seven Dials Mystery*, Bundle does not solve the mystery because she has been kept out of the way by male detectives (Superintendent Battle), but it is precisely the fact that she does not stop investigating from beginning to end what makes her a true detective, although amateur. Moreover, Bundle is not stopped by her father Lord Caterham, who believes in her daughter's intelligence and does not put her limits.

On the other hand, with Miss Marple one can easily see that, although Christie's degree of psychological complexity in her characters is not so high, the old spinster always manages to deepen in the character's sense of the good and the bad, of obscure thoughts and dubious intentions.

With Tuppence Beresford, also, Christie depicts the married woman of the 20th century who is not subordinate to her husband, but who rather forms a team with him. However, as previously seen, this female character does not appear as stuck to Tommy but as an individual detective who works on her own and with her own detective methods.

If one pays attention at how this female detectives are depicted in the novels, one can easily see that Christie has explored the multiple ways in which women were able to live and to make a space for themselves in a society directed and reinforced by men's ideas and ideals. Apart from being novels with crimes and mysteries, these novels contain other topics such as women's freedom: the fact that the three female characters can work on their own and show an uncommon level of independence for their time.

All in all, Christie's depiction of females, not only as detectives but as individual characters, does not only give the reader the impression that women can feel identified with them. The three characters have their own personal ways and methods to solve crimes and mysteries, but if the question at stake is: could women investigate crimes? Then the answer is a categorical YES .

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