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“Everything is simple if you arrange the facts methodically": A Narratological Approach to Agatha Christie's Fictional Mysteries

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ABSTRACT

Detective novels are one of the most popular literary genres in the English language. However, although several writers have contributed to this literary formula, the most prominent author is undoubtedly Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie (1890 - 1976). Christie is a best-selling crime and mystery author who is often regarded as the genre's finest exponent. This Bachelor's Thesis is largely concerned with evaluating detective fiction, especially the subgenres of thriller and whodunit, in two of Christie's best-known masterpieces: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and *And Then There Were None* (1939). An in-depth examination of both works is provided here in order to prove the representation of both subgenres in Christie's ouvre and to contrast their differences, as well as to determine which typology prevails in each case.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, detective fiction, thriller, whodunit, crime fiction, best-seller

RESUMEN

Las novelas detectivescas son uno de los géneros literarios más populares en lengua inglesa. Sin embargo, aunque diferentes escritores han contribuido a este formato literario, la autora más destacada es sin duda Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie (1890 - 1976). Christie es una autora de *best-sellers* de crimen y misterio, considerada el mejor exponente del género. Este proyecto se encarga en gran medida de evaluar la ficción detectivesca, especialmente los subgéneros *thriller* y *whodunit*, en dos conocidas novelas de esta autora: *El asesinato de Roger Ackroyd* (1926) y *Y no quedó ninguno* (1939). Se ofrece un análisis en profundidad de ambas obras para demostrar la presencia de ambos subgéneros en la producción novelística de Agatha Christie y contrastar sus diferencias, así como para determinar qué tipología prevalece en cada caso.

Palabras clave: Agatha Christie, ficción detectivesca, *thriller*, *whodunit*, novela de crimen, superventas.

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1. INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGICAL REMARKS

In this Bachelor's thesis, I aim to demonstrate how a variety of ideas and principles concerning genres, subgenres, and subtypes of detective fiction may help us comprehend particular narratives and, more specifically, draw clear distinctions in Agatha Christie's detective fiction output.

More specifically, the following paper examines specific plot-related aspects within this author's craft and attempts to describe how Christie employs her writing skills by typically following or breaking certain rules in order to produce works that, to the reader's eyes, may appear identical, but which undoubtedly contain certain nuances that in content and form they are very different. Such a meshwork of encouraged and thwarted expectations leads Christie's readers (as well as her detectives) into a process of investigation that is, to say the least, complicated. My starting hypothesis is that the consideration of Agatha Christie's fictional mysteries against the backdrop provided by theoretical descriptions of the detective fiction genre and its subtypes can prove that the author's oeuvre is anything but homogeneous in narratological terms.

Following this introduction, my discussion is organized into three major sections. Chapter 2 reviews Christie's career and biographical background, together with several robust models for the study of detective fiction, with a special focus on critics Todorov, or Van Dine and, on the terms, "detective fiction", "whodunit" and "thriller". Finally, Chapter 3 provides a narratological discussion of two of Agatha Christie's works, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *And Then There Were None*, in order to provide an in-depth analysis aimed at showing the former novel adheres to the whodunit standard within detective fiction, while the latter is a thriller: a claim that I have attempted to substantiate with Van Dine's rules and Todorov's definitions.

In carrying out my analysis I have relied on about ten scholarly contributions written and published during the 20th and 21st century. Interestingly, I found more secondary sources about several adaptations of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (the stage play, the film, radio, television...), than about the novel itself.

On the other hand, I have followed a qualitative approach insofar as I have focused on conceptual terms developed by a limited number of critics rather than on numerical, stylometric observations. In this manner, I have tried to anchor my discussion on theoretical models that would help me establish the differences between the thriller and the whodunit subgenres, and to ascertain whether or not Agatha Christie used of both narrative architectures in her novels. By implementing this approach on my research question, I have deliberately "yes" or "no" answers in favor of the whys and wherefores of the topic under examination.

To put it briefly, I have probed into the categories detective fiction, whodunit, and thriller, which I then applied to the two novels mentioned above, which are separated by thirteen years in Agatha Christie's literary trajectory.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1. AGATHA CHRISTIE AS A UNIQUE CRIME WRITER

Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie (born September 15, 1890, in Torquay, Devon, England-died January 12, 1976, in Wallingford, Oxfordshire) was an English dramatist and detective novelist. The youngest of three siblings, she was tutored at home by her own mother, who was a storyteller herself, and didn't let Agatha learn to read until the age of eight. However, Agatha acquired reading skills on her own by the age of five, and afterwards, it was her mother, Clara, who encouraged her to start writing. In 1912, Agatha met Archie Christie, a Royal Flying Corps pilot, and according to her autobiography, what attracted them to each other was the "excitement of the stranger" (Christie, 1977). Finally, they married on Christmas Eve 1914, after Archie had experienced war in France, and Agatha working as a nurse in a Red Cross Hospital in Torquay. During that period, she dedicated most of her free time to write, and ended up writing several short stories. Finally, she published her first book, named *The Mysterious Affair at Styles,* in 1920.

> People often ask me what made me take up writing ... I found myself making up stories and acting the different parts. There's nothing like boredom to make you write. So, by the time I was 16 or 17, I'd written quite a number of short stories and one long, dreary novel. By the time I was 21, I finished the first book of mine ever to be published. (Christie, n.d.)

This book was her first good detective story, even though it took time to finish it and longer to publish, thus giving birth to one of Christie's most well-known characters: The Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, who appeared in nearly 25 novels and several short stories. When the book was finally released, Agatha won an uncommon honor for a fiction writer: a review in *The Pharmaceutical Journal*.

Once the war was finished, Agatha continued to write and approached various forms of thriller and murder, mystery novels, giving birth to characters Tommy and Tuppence in a short period of time, who were then followed by Miss Marple, another of her principal detective figures.

Christie, considered a best-selling author, published a total of 66 detective novels and 14 short story collections, subsequently selling over a billion copies of her books in the English language, and around a billion in translation.

Since Christie wrote a huge number of novels, it is impossible in this bachelor's thesis to provide an in-depth analysis of all of them (or even of a relatively small selection for that matter), so it is mandatory to narrow our sample to a couple of titles that lend themselves to a comparative, contrastive analysis. More specifically, the novels to be discussed in later sections will be *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd (1926)* and *And Then There Were None (1939)*.

As for *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, it was published in 1926. It was, and it still is, considered a true masterpiece and arguably the one of the most influential crime novels ever written. In fact, in that same year Agatha Christie went missing due to two traumatic episodes in her life: her mother died and her husband, Colonel Archibald Christie, was caught having an affair with another woman, resulting in a divorce petition. After several days of searching, it was discovered by authorities that Christie was registered at a Harrogate Hotel, under the name of her husband's fiancée.

Several years later, in 1930, she married the archeologist and professor Sir Max Mallowan. During their marriage they made expeditions together to Iran and Syria, an experience which boosted Christie's creativity and innovation and led to works like *And*

Then There Were None (1939*)* or the memoir *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (1946) in which, specifically, those expeditions abroad were recounted.

Regarding the former publication, it is a mystery novel written during the late 30s. Initially, in the UK it appeared titled as *Ten Little Niggers*, but later this title had to be modified due to the word "nigger" being highly offensive in the American culture. In reference to this controversy, Sadie Stein recognized in 2016 that ""[E]ven in 1939, this title was considered too offensive for American publication", adding that "Christie's work is not known for its racial sensitivity, and by modern standards her oeuvre is rife with casual Orientalism." (Stein, 2016, paras. 2-3) That notwithstanding, *And Then There Were None* is one of the best-selling books of all time, apart from making Christie what she is nowadays: the best-selling novelist of all time (according to the Agatha Christie Estate).

In her last years, Christie ceased to write as prolifically as before. Indeed, already after the war, from 1946 on, she began to enjoy a slower lifestyle and stopped publishing at full throttle. Also, while she devoted little time to writing, she decided to publish under the pseudonym "Mary Westmacott" so as to feel released from the burden of public expectations concerning her literary persona. Christie was last seen in public in 1974 during the opening night of Sydney Lumet's film version of *Murder on the Orient Express*. In Christie's words, it was "a good adaptation with the minor point that Poirot's moustaches weren't luxurious enough." (*About Agatha Christie - The World's Best-Selling Novelist*, n.d., para. 3)

She was appointed a Dame of the British Empire, the nation's highest civilian honor, shortly before her death in 1971. Finally, at the age of 86 and after a truly happy life and by a highly successful career, Agatha Christie died peacefully in January 1976.

Her last work, which was published posthumously, was her *An Autobiography* (1977), where she recounted her private life from her early childhood through her fascinating adulthood until her last years which were filled with memories. Christie (1977) makes a statement towards the end of her work: "What can I say at seventy-five? 'Thank God for my good life, and for all the love that has been given to me." (p. 478)

2.2. DETECTIVE FICTION AS A SUBGENRE

Detective fiction is widely recognized as a subgenre of both crime and mystery fiction in which detective story, type of popular literature in which the main character, generally a detective, investigates a crime (often a murder) and the culprit is eventually revealed (The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 2012). However, the poet W.H Auden in his essay-article *The Guilty Vicarage* (1948), defines the genre with the following words: "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." (Auden, 1948, p.1).

Detective fiction, like any other literary genre, is constrained by a set of guidelines. S.S. Van Dine (real name Willard Huntington Wright), the author of *The Benson Murder Case* (1926) and *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (1928), among others, introduced these concepts in the latter work, arguing for the use of 20 criteria – rules to produce a superb detective fiction novel. He argued that:

> The detective story is a kind of intellectual game. It is more—it is a sporting event. [...] For the writing of detective stories there are very definite laws—unwritten, perhaps, but nonetheless binding; and every respectable and self-respecting concocter of literary mysteries lives up to them. Herewith, then, is a sort of Credo, based partly on the practice of all the great writers of detective stories, and partly on the promptings of the honest author's inner conscience. (Wright, 1928, p.6)

Although such criteria are frequently established but not always complied with, they are still specific manifestations of a vision of the genre that was certainly valid in the "golden age" of detective fiction, the 1920s and 1930s, when Christie was building her own style of mystery (Alexander, 2006, p.11). Indeed, she generally follows these rules, but she is equally comfortable defying them if the plot requires to do so.

Other authors and critics, in addition to Van Dine, formulated restrictions to specific criteria, such as the novelist J. Charles Rzepka, who likewise proposed a number of features that must be present in a detective story. 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 (Rzepka, 2005). According to the poet W.H Auden, "the detective story has five elements — the milieu, the victim, the murderer, the suspects, the detectives." (Auden, 1948, p.2)

In section 3 of this bachelor's thesis, we will examine the extent to which Agatha Christie departs from (or follows) such prescriptions, that is, both Todorov's definitions and Van Dine's rules, in two of her novels: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd,* and *And Then Were None.*

What is clear, in any case, is that the genre does more than just convey a narrative. Rather than assigning readers a purely passive role, the detective story engages their involved participation, their sharp awareness that they have a riddle, a conundrum to solve. In the words of Roger Caillois, "The culprit's discovery must shock and satisfy simultaneously" (Caillois, 1984, p.7.)

But where did Van Dine receive those rules from? The earliest specimen of detective fiction, according to tradition, was *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, written by Edgar Allan Poe (1809-1849) and published in 1841, nearly a century before Van Dine's criteria were presented. From then on, the genre thrived, inspiring numerous writers to develop completely new works that left no one indifferent. One of those early writers was Arthur Conan Doyle, in whose *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) there appeared for the first time one of the most famous fictional detectives of all times: Sherlock Holmes (in companionship of Dr. Watson). Such was the success of this character that many authors followed Conan Doyle's example, and during the 20th century the genre continued to expand heavily. As a result, we have "the emergence of what later came to be termed the "Golden Age" of detective fiction, with Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Margery Allingham among the most prominent names." (Stewart, 2017, p. 102)

However, neither all detective fiction books, nor their writers, invariably follow such restrictive principles. In his classic essay-chapter, "The Typology of Detective Fiction" (1966), included in the 2010 reader *Crime and Media* (pp. 291-301) edited by Chris Greer, the multifaceted structuralist critic Tzvetan Todorov (1939-2017) begins by exploring certain tensions in our understanding of literary genres before swiftly landing on his own taxonomy of crime fiction. He particularly notes that the tradition inherited from the studies of the classical period meant that "a work was judged poor if it did not sufficiently obey the rules of its genre"; by contrast, following the Romantic tradition, "to classify several works in a genre is to devalue them".

In the face of this apparent contradiction, Todorov adopted a nuanced position and answered the need for a more comprehensive knowledge of a generic category like the detective story to appreciate its value and the rich variety of typologies it encompasses. Even so, he argued that in the case of popular genres like the one that constitutes the target of this thesis, an interesting phenomenon takes place. While in general terms "the literary masterpiece does not enter any genre save perhaps its own"[1], the major works of popular literature "[are] precisely the book[s] which best fits [their] genre" (Todorov, 1966, p.43). Unlike what happens in other genres, a masterpiece of detective fiction is one that complies to the genre's norms but does not violate them.

Todorov's critique and reformulation of Van Dine's principles led him to define a set of subtypes within the genre. Thus, he distinguishes between three formats present in detective fiction, namely the whodunit, the thriller, and the combination of the two: the suspense novel. For the sake of economy, but also for their relevance to the focus of our contrastive analysis of the two novels of choice, we will specifically concentrate on the first two categories, their patterns, and differences.

2.3. WHODUNITS

According to the Merriam Webster Dictionary, a whodunit is "a detective story or mystery story", whereas the Cambridge Dictionary defines it as "a story about a crime and the attempt to discover who committed it." The term's origins may be traced back to the years 1925-1930, when it first appeared as a humorous transcription of the question "Who done it?", in turn a shortened and colloquial version of standard English "Who did it?". Following the same source, it was not until the year 1930 when it was finally coined (in connection with crime and mystery fiction) by book critic Donald Gordon, in his review of Milward Kennedy's outstanding mystery novel *Half-Mast Murder* (1930), which he described as "a satisfactory whodunit" in the literary magazine *News of Books*.

[1] In other words, major works can spawn a new genre by themselves, insofar as instead of adhering to the canonical form's established conventions, they generate their own norms, making it hard to copy or replicate them.

Is it, nevertheless, a synonym for mystery? Many reviewers agree that it is a mystery story, but some argue that the whodunit contains nuances that distinguish it as a specific form of detective fiction rather than a synonym for the general category. This is also the case of the aforementioned critic Tzvetan Todorov, who differentiates the whodunit from other forms of detective fiction and defends its dual character.

Indeed, what we know as a “true” whodunit is a story that:

> contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. In their purest form, these two stories have no point in common [...] The first [story] —the story of the crime— tells 'what really happened,' whereas the second —the story of the investigation— explains 'how the reader (or the narrator) has come to know about it. (Todorov, 1966, pp. 44-45).

If this is so, then Agatha Christie stands out among all authors of the "authentic" whodunit. This is owing to Christie's original approach within the usual framework of the whodunit story, which consists, in the words of Howard Haycraft, in that Christie's murderers are not "the least likely" (Haycraft, 1941). They are, indeed, the most probable, including spouses, lovers, wives, relatives, and those with a thirst for vengeance. This is one of the key reasons for her readership's enjoyment, as she provides them with a puzzle in which every step they take, requires them to go three steps backwards since, as is typical of Christie's writing, nothing is as it appears, and everything is possible. In fact, this apparent contradiction is what makes Christie's stories so tough to unravel:

> the reader's mistaken presumption that the mystery is complex and that the texts are hermeneutically structured to enable a reader to imitate the detective or alter-ego in sorting through clues to discover a pattern. Agatha Christie's hermeneutic, however, is a negating one, one that takes a relatively simple murder and through the reading process
> controverts the reader's reason. (Haycraft, 1941, p. 160)

But, considering how "typical" her assailants can be, why are the endings so unsettling? Agatha Christie’s praxis is based on taking a straightforward murder and confusing the reader’s logic via exhaustive reading. Hence, the reader's ideas are extensively closed rather than generally open, which is done on purpose to lead the reader to a false suspect. The answer to the previous question then relies on the reader's mistaken assumption that the crime is nearly impossible to solve and that it must "follow a pattern"

when “the clues themselves become insignificant, and the solution lies not in untangling their pattern, but in discovering the mechanism by which the reader's mind is closed" (Singer, 1984, p.160).

2.4. THRILLERS

According to the Collins Dictionary, a thriller is “a book, film, or play that tells an exciting fictional story about something such as criminal activities or spying”. In fact, as thrillers may fit into various formats, which makes them a very broad category, we will only focus on their existence as literary fictions, leaving out film, television, and other non-literature-related media.

While the term "thriller" is relatively new, thrillers have been around for a long time. Greek poet Homer's *Odyssey* (725 BCE), the European fairy tale *Little Red Writing Hood* (1967) as written by the German scholars Wilhelm and Jacob Grimm, and French novelist Alexandre Dumas' *The Count of Monte Cristo* (1844) may be said to contain features of the thriller category. The familiar thriller genre is distinguished by its suspense —a sense of joyous excitement, ambiguity, and continual intensity of emotion about what is to come, interwoven with fear, expectancy, and, in some cases, terror. This emotional spectrum emerges throughout a novel as a result of an unexpected storyline that causes the reader to consider the impact of certain characters' actions. Typically, suspense builds up as the story progresses towards its climax, which will undoubtedly be memorable. As a result of the degree of tension, intrigue, and mystery involved in this genre, the thriller is noted for its emotional intensity. In fact, such feelings develop during the reading process, keeping the piece suspenseful from beginning to end. As a result, the reader is taken on a roller coaster ride of intrigues and desires.

Typically, the quality of a thriller is defined by a quality that we may term “intricacy” and by an electrifying plot. But what does it mean to "thrill"? It derives from the Middle English words *thirlen*, and *thrillen*, and even before them from the Old English term *thyrlian*. This verb is now defined as “to cause (someone) to experience a strong feeling of enjoyable excitement” (Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary, 1999). As a result, a "thrill" is linked to emotion: it can elicit excitement, curiosity, suspense, and

sensationalism. It may also be joyous, horrifying, or inspire fear, uncertainty, and terror. This is most likely the fictional thriller's principal purpose.

Even though there is an obvious contrast between the two, thriller novels are sometimes mistaken with detective novels. Julian Symons defined the crime novel as separate from the conventional detective narrative in his 1993 book, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel.* To summarize Symons's point, the thriller possesses the following characteristics: it does not frequently have a detective (and when it does, he or she plays a secondary role); it is based on the psychology of characters or "an intolerable situation that must end in violence;" the setting is often central to the background and atmosphere of the story (and is inextricably bound up with the nature of the crime itself); "the social perspective of the story is often radical, and questions some aspect of society, law, or justice," and "[t]he lives of characters are shown continuing after the crime, and often their subsequent behaviour is important to the story's effect" (Symons, 1993).

Nonetheless, in detective fiction it is the main character who is confronted with a mystery (for example, in Christie's novels, it is Hercule Poirot who often discovers a murder), and he must solve the case and find out what happened. As a result, the detective and the mystery are at the heart of the detective fiction. Meanwhile, in the thriller, the protagonist is presented in the midst of terrifying circumstances (a natural catastrophe, a tragedy, the crimes by serial murderer...) and must find a way out by upgrading and acquiring new skills. As a result, the criminal and the crime are at the heart of the crime thriller.

Other authors, such as James Patterson, have provided interesting definitions of the term "thriller". In his monograph *Thriller: Stories to Keep You Up All Night* (2016) he claims that thrillers "provide such a rich literary feast…this openness to expansion is one of genre's most enduring characteristics. But what gives the variety of thrillers a common ground is the intensity of emotions they create, particularly those of apprehension and exhilaration, of excitement and breathlessness, all designed to generate that all-important thrill. By definition, if a thriller doesn't thrill, it's not doing its job." (Patterson, 2016)

In addition to the aforementioned considerations, since thrillers conform such a broad genre, there are sub-genres within this category that contain crime-style narratives. Such is the case of legal thrillers (and the earlier police procedural), spy thrillers, futuristic thrillers, psychological thrillers, political thrillers, racing thrillers, heist thrillers, cyberpunk thrillers, the 'troubling' thriller, and the faction thriller, among others (Scaggs, 2005).

To return now to Tzvetan Todorov, he defines the thriller (the s*érie noire)* as "another genre within detective fiction", one which was created after World War II in the United States (Todorov, 1966). In fact, an as pointed out above, he draws a distinction between the whodunit (the story of the crime and the story of the investigation), and the suspense novel (the combination of the whodunit and the thriller), stating that:

> [T]his kind of detective fiction fuses the two stories or [more precisely] suppresses the first and vitalizes the second [...] In other words, its constitutive character is in its themes ... Indeed, it is around these few constants that the thriller is constituted: violence, generally sordid crime, [and] the amorality of the characters. (Todorov, 1966, pp. 47-48)

In sum, Todorov highlights how the thriller differs from the whodunit in that the former has two narratives, whilst the latter contains just one. In a whodunit, the main character, such as Hercule Poirot, does not risk his life and is not threatened by the culprit; in a whodunit, the main character (and the narrator) has achieved immunity, which implies that nothing can happen to them. In a thriller, however, the opposite occurs: the main character may jeopardize his health, if not his life.

3. DISCUSSION

Tzvetan Todorov writes in "The Typology of Detective Fiction" that a whodunit, or a specimen of the so-called detective fiction, must be separated into two parts: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation (1966, pp. 44 – 45). In the same essay he further claims that a thriller is "another genre within detective fiction", one which only contains the narrative of the crime, and suppresses the story of the investigation (pp. 47 – 48).

The discussion below focuses on two novels by Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (section 3.1) and *And Then Were None* (section 3.2), and explores the differences and similarities found in both works, as well as their proximity to the whodunit or thriller, respectively, in section 3.3. In order to evaluate and contrast the two novels against this premise, I will first provide offer a brief overview and background for each before discussing more specific aspects involved in their narratological configuration in the last section of this chapter.

3.1. *THE MURDER OF ROGER ACKROYD* (1926)

Agatha Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* was initially serialized in fifty-four sections in the *London Evening News* from 16 July 1925 to 16 September 1925, under the title "Who Killed Ackroyd?". Afterwards, this work of detective-fiction, was first published in book format in the United Kingdom in June 1926, and it was Agatha Christie's first novel to be issued by William Collins & Sons[2]. Collins merged with Harper & Row in 1990, becoming the HarperCollins book publisher, which is still Christie's publisher today. As such, it is the fourth novel in Christie's Poirot series, that is, the fourth novel to feature well-known sleuth Hercule Poirot, and it is the work that catapulted Christie's career to the next level owing to its unexpected reveal. It was placed 49th on *Le Monde*'s "100 Books of the Century"[3] list in 1999, as well as named the best crime novel of all time by the British Crime Writers' Association (CWA) in 2013. In addition, in his classic 1941 book, *Murder for Pleasure*, Howard Haycraft listed the novel as one of the "cornerstones" of the most influential crime novels ever written. As a matter of fact, Laura Thompson (2007), Christie's biographer, claimed that:

> *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is the supreme, the ultimate detective novel. It rests upon the most elegant of all twists, the narrator who is revealed to be the murderer. This twist is not merely a function of plot: it puts the whole concept of detective fiction on an armature and sculpts it into a dazzling new shape. It was not an entirely new idea ... nor was it entirely her own idea ... but here, she realised, was

[2] William Collins, Sons was a Scottish printing and publishing firm started in Glasgow in 1819 by a Presbyterian schoolmaster, William Collins, in conjunction with Charles Chalmers, the younger brother of Thomas Chalmers, pastor of Tron Church, Glasgow.

[3] The list of the 100 Books of the Century consists of the best books published in the twentieth century. It was put together in the spring of 1999 as a result of a survey conducted by the French retailer Fnac and the Paris newspaper *Le Monde*.

> an idea worth having. And only she could have pulled it off so completely. Only she had the requisite control, the willingness to absent herself from the authorial scene and let her plot shine clear (pp. 155-156)

Thus, Thompson's statement "nor was it entirely her own idea" relates to the point in which Christie confessed in her *An Autobiography* (1977) that the fundamental idea of the novel (the killer as a type of Dr. Watson) was initially offered to her by both her brother-in-law, James Watts of Abney Hall, and Lord Louis Mountbatten (who wrote her a letter outlining the idea for a new Poirot novel)

The plotline goes thus: Hercule Poirot, private detective, spends his retirement near the home of his friend Roger Ackroyd, in a (fictional) village known as King's Abbot, nine miles away from the town of Cranchester. The story opens with the death of Mrs. Ferrars, a wealthy widow who was also Ackroyd's fiancée. As a result, rumors circulate in the community that she had previously poisoned her ex-husband, and while Dr. Sheppard, the town doctor and narrator of this story, rules her death an accident, some neighbors suspect suicide. That is the case of Dr. Sheppard's sister, Caroline Sheppard, who tells him that she believes it was suicide from the remorse for having poisoned Mr. Ferrars:

> "What is your diagnosis?" I demanded coldly. "An unfortunate love affair, I suppose?"
> My sister shook her head. "Remorse," she said, with great gusto.
> "Remorse?"
> "Yes. You never would believe me when I told you she poisoned her husband. I'm more than ever convinced of it now."
> "I don't think you're very logical," I objected. "Surely if a woman committed a crime like murder, she'd be sufficiently cold-blooded to enjoy the fruits of it without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance."
>
> (Christie, 2022, pp. 10-11)

Following this conversation, Roger Ackroyd informs Dr. Sheppard that Ferrars had been blackmailed because of her husband's strange death, and Roger Ackroyd is murdered that evening in the study of his Fernly Park home. At once, Flora Ackroyd, niece of Ackroyd and fiancée to Ralph Paton, demands Poirot to investigate the murder. The main reason is that Paton is considered by the police the major suspect in the murder,

but Poirot does not believe so, even though he has disappeared since the tragedy. Indeed, Dr. Sheppard, in the manner of a detective, assists Poirot in the investigation of the case, as Captain Arthur Hastings would in earlier books by Christie, or as Dr. Watson does for Sherlock Holmes. As a result, Poirot undertakes a thorough investigation, culminating in the novel's last chapter, "Apologia", where it is discovered that all the suspects did not have an alibi at the time of the murder, but they did have a reason to kill Ackroyd (Schaik, 2015). Finally, in the denouement, the detective reveals that the killer is the narrator, Dr. Sheppard, and the story concludes with his "apologia" in the form of a confession before his deliberate suicide.

3.2. *AND THEN THERE WERE NONE* (1939)

And Then There Were None is one of Agatha Christie's most fascinating works, as well as the world's favorite Christie novel. The Collins Crime Club first published it in November 1939 under the title "Ten Little Niggers," which was later altered to "Ten Little Indians" owing to its pejorative connotations as a racial slur. It is regarded as one of her most intricate and challenging stories, and the year of its release, the *New York Times* claimed dubbed it "utterly impossible and utterly fascinating. It is the most baffling mystery Agatha Christie has ever written" (1939). The title of the book was subsequently modified for the January 1940 US version so as to echo the last five words of a children's counting rhyme and minstrel song that plays an important role in the plot.

"It was so difficult to do," Christie admitted, "that the idea had fascinated me." The result was a starting premise that has now become a cliché to modern readers of crime fiction, and indeed a massive success for Agatha Christie. Her accomplishment was such that, according to the Christie estate, the narrative has become her most adapted work (plays, films, a video game), with more than 100 million sales worldwide, making it the world's best-selling crime novel and the seventh most popular book of all time. Only her 1926 classic *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* comes close.

And Then Were None opens with the introduction of eight people from diverse social occupations: Anthony Marston, General MacArthur, Miss Emily Brent, Justice Wargrave, Dr. Armstrong, Ex-inspector Blore, Mr. Lombard and Miss Vera Claythorne.

A certain Mr. U.N. Owen has sent eight letters, inviting them all to spend a few days in a mansion on the fictional “Soldier Island” off the English coast (called "Ni**er Island" in the original 1939 UK release, and "Indian Island" in the 1940 US version). Once they arrive, they are informed that Thomas Rogers, butler of the mansion, and Ethel Rogers, maid, will attend them since their hosts, Mr., and Mrs. U.N. Owen (Ulick Norman Owen and Una Nancy Owen), are now abroad. On the wall of each guest room is an unusual piece of bric-a-brac and a hanging copy of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldiers" ("Ni**ers" or "Indians" in previous editions). When they settle down for their first dinner that evening, they spot ten china figurines of soldiers on the dining table. The poem or so-called old nursery rhyme, goes like this–

Ten little soldier boys went out to dine;
One choked his little self and then there were Nine.

Nine little soldier boys sat up very late;
One overslept himself and then there were Eight.

Eight little soldier boys travelling in Devon;
One said he’d stay there and then there were Seven.

Seven little soldier boys chopping up sticks;
One chopped himself in halves and then there were Six.

Six little soldier boys playing with a hive;
A bumble bee stung one and then there were Five.

Five little soldier boys going in for law;
One got in Chancery and then there were Four.

Four little soldier boys going out to sea;
A red herring swallowed one and then there were Three.

Three little soldier boys walking in the Zoo;
A big bear hugged one and then there were Two.

Two little soldier boys sitting in the sun;
One got frizzled up and then there was One.

One little soldier boy left all alone;
He went and hanged himself

And then there were None.

Frank Green, 1869
(Christie, 2011, pp. 7–8)

As "dinner was drawing to a close" (Christie, 2011, p. 33), the guests are caught off guard by a distorted voice that emerges from a gramophone record, notifying the ten crimes they have been convicted of, concluding with *"Prisoners at the bar, have you anything to say in your defence?"*[4] (Christie, 2011, p. 38). After the announcement, they start to gather as much information as they can about the host, U.N. Owen, but they realize that none of them actually know him, and one of the guests, Justice Wargrave, remarks that "U.N. Owen" sounds like "Unknown," (the killer's wicked humor is on display here) leading them to believe that they have been invited to the island by a psychopathic killer (Christie, 2011, pp. 46 – 47).

What comes next is the murder of Anthony Marston, who chokes on his poisoned drink: seemingly an accident, but corresponding to the first line of the nursery rhyme. Terrified, the visitors decide to leave Soldier Island the next morning, when the boat is expected to arrive to provide supplies. The ferry, however, never arrives, and all the guests are murdered one by one, in the sequence and manner specified by each line of the poem, every death followed by the removal of one figurine from the dining table. While the events unfold, the guests become suspicious of one another as there is no one else on the island except them, and guests continue to die. They turn against each other and ponder the possibility that the killer is one among them. From this point on, there is a constant struggle for survival which they subsequently lose until the last person alive, Vera Claythorne, hangs herself. Finally, in the novel's epilogue, a confession in the form of a letter submitted to the police reveals who the orchestrator was and explains the perpetrator's goal: to exact punishment for the atrocities committed by the guests. Finally, the author declares at the conclusion of the letter that he will ultimately take his own life. Eventually, the signature on the letter exposes the identity of the murderer: Justice Wargrave.

[4] Italics in the original.

3.3. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF BOTH NOVELS

After this brief contextualization and summary of both novels, we will next engage in a more in-depth analysis so as to test the hypothesis that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* work can be classified as a "whodunit" rather than a "thriller" in the general framework of detective fiction; and that, conversely, *And Then There Were None* fits into the “thriller" rather than the "whodunit" category. Our contrastive discussion will draw upon Todorov's definitions of whodunit and thriller in "The Typology of Detective Fiction," as well as the selection made on Van Dine's *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* by, Marc Gabriel Alexander in his master’s thesis from 2006.

In "Murder and Manners: The Formal Detective Novel," George Grella (1970) claims that the whodunit has become a classic in the field of popular fiction, explaining that, in fact, it is a murder committed in an isolated location, typically in an English country house, where a group of people are gathered, and the murderer is one of them. In that setting everyone is suspect, and “nobody seems to be telling the truth”. As a result, the "whodunit" generally features a mystery that perplexes all characters (even the authorities) until a famous detective – in this case, Poirot – arrives to solve the case (p.30). An essential characteristic of the whodunit, indeed, is the setting, as it fully detaches the plot from the rest of the world (p.39). An example of this narrative space is Fernly Park, whose owner is Ackroyd and which is the most notable house of King’s Abbot rural landscape (Christie, 2022, p. 14). On the other hand, in *And Then There Were None*, this locale is provided by Soldier Island (along with the modern mansion), the remote setting where the narrative takes place. Although there are similarities between the two places, such as the group of people secluded in the mansion or the fact that everyone is a suspect, the latter novel cannot be considered a whodunit since, according to Grella, no famous detective appears to solve the case, (1970, p. 30). In this instance, however, it is the police who is sent a letter detailing everything that has happened on Soldier Island, a confession written by the murderer himself.

Tzvetan Todorov (1966) asserts in "The Typology of Detective Fiction" that the whodunit is a narrative that conveys two stories: that of the crime and that of the investigation (pp. 44 - 45), whereas the thriller is a narrative that suppresses the story of the investigation and only contains the narrative of the crime (pp. 47 – 48).

Using Todorov's definition as a guide, we may claim that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* fits the traditional whodunit criteria. This is due to the fact that the story not only focuses on the murders committed during the plot, but we can distinguish between the two narratives characterized by the critic. As a result, the criminal plot is limited to the novel's conclusion, notably chapter XXVII, "Apologia," in which the killer, Dr. Sheppard, confesses the entire crime and his motivations.

> When I looked round the room from the door, I was quite satisfied. Nothing had been left undone. The dictaphone was on the table by the window, timed to go off at nine thirty (the mechanism of that little device was rather clever—based on the principle of an alarm clock), and the armchair was pulled out so as to hide it from the door.
>
> (Christie, 2022, p. 354)

This is not to suggest that the crime itself is not mentioned throughout the tale, but one can plainly see how the narrative focuses on the investigation of the murders by detective Hercule Poirot and Dr. Sheppard (in true Dr. Watson manner).

> "You mean—?" I gasped.
> Poirot nodded. "Yes, I meant that. At nine-thirty Mr. Ackroyd was already dead. It was the dictaphone speaking—not the man."
> "And the murderer switched it on. Then he must have been in the room at that minute?"
>
> (Christie, 2022, p. 343)

As a result, this novel entirely illustrates Todorov's above-mentioned narratological framework by rendering both the account of the crime, in this case in the concluding chapter "Apologia," and the story of the inquiry, which is essentially the plot of the novel. According to Beverly Lyon Clark, "the book violates earlier conventions, for the shake of the least likely suspect... Yet it does not violate the rationality fundamental to classic detective stories" (1982, p. 12). To cut a long story short, if we follow Todorov closely, it turns out that *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is a novel that adheres to the "whodunit" norm; but does Christie's *And Then There Were None*?

Indeed, in the latter narrative we are provided with a plot that is somewhat similar to the previous one; yet there are substantial differences between the two that prevent it from being classified as a traditional "whodunit" according to Todorov's proposal. In

contrast, instead of anchoring the narrative on the story of the investigation (like she did in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*), Christie's tale here hinges on the story of the crime. Indeed, all the individuals depicted remain highly alert throughout the plot, but none of them is the detective who is meant to solve the case. The first important difference between the two novels is that Poirot is not there in *And Then There Were None* to pick up the clues, while the storyline heavily focuses on the persistent murders. As a result, it is presumed that there is an as yet anonymous serial murderer whose identity is eventually disclosed as that of one of the characters previously introduced. True enough, in *And Then There Were None* we must wait until the last chapter, the "Epilogue", to make this consequential finding, just as we did in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. In this case, however, there is no need for the police or a detective to hunt for clues about what happened because the killer himself, Justice Wargrave, answers the main Wh-questions in his letter addressed to Scotland Yard.

Taking everything into consideration, it is safe to declare that this novel certainly does not comply with Todorov's paradigm of the whodunit in any manner. As a result, and insofar as we only get the account of the crime and no information about the investigation itself, we can safely posit that *And Then Were None* follows the thriller norm.

Furthermore, the setting, the killer, the victim, the suspects, and the detectives are all important parts in a detective story (Auden, 1948, p.2). All five elements are included in the novel's plot in this case, with the setting being the Fernly Park house, the killer Dr. Sheppard, the victim Mr. Ackroyd, the suspects all those close to Roger Ackroyd, and the detectives Poirot and the murderer himself.

Let us now pick up Van Dine's *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (1928), without which, as we saw in a previous section of this thesis, one cannot supposedly have a genuine piece of detective fiction. As mentioned above, in his comprehensive study on manipulation and persuasion in Agatha Christie's novels, and as one of the several theoretical frameworks that he deploys, Marc Alexander (2006) performs a selection on Van Dine's classical list of rules on the basis of their adequacy for the dissection of a group of Christie's novels that includes *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. More particularly, the singled-out rules are numbers 1,2,4,5,10,12,15 and 18 (pp. 12-13). I will next

summarize, discuss, and complete his brief account of the applicability of some of these rules to the latter work (pp.57 ff.) in the broader context on narrative unreliability, while introducing my own contrastive analysis of *And Then There Were None*, which is absent from the corpus of Christie's novels that Alexander sets out to examine. In this way I hope to compare the narratological syntax of both works against a simple and stable theoretical framework.

> 1. "The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described." –To ensure that this criterion is followed, we must bear in mind that the reader cannot have more knowledge than the detective, since this would put the reader one step ahead of the detective, thus breaching the first guideline. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Sheppard cannot be allowed to confess his guilt to the reader because it would create a gap between Poirot's and the reader's understanding of the murder. The latter is exactly what happens in *And Then There Were None*, where the narrator cannot divulge anything to the reader, nor can he tell anything to the "detective" because no such detective features in the plot.
>
> 2. "No willful tricks or deceptions may be placed on the reader other than those played legitimately by the criminal on the detective himself." […] – Since the detective has no means of knowing what a suspect is contemplating, this is an example of Christie's deceit in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Alexander, 2006, p. 59). In the case of the other novel, *And Then There Were None*, the reader is left perplexed since the killings occur without apparent justification, and the reader themselves are unable to grasp how the murders occur. (Chakraborty, 2021, p. 7).
>
> 4. "The detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit. This is bald trickery, on a par with offering some one a bright penny for a five-dollar gold piece. It's false pretenses." – Christie may be considered to have broken this rule in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* since the culprit, Sheppard, who serves as a detective assisting Poirot, conceals the clear fact that he killed Ackroyd from both the reader and the detective from the onset. In *And Then There Were None*, on the other hand, since there is no evidence of a

detective, we may be certain that this criterion is followed because the sole killer is the narrator.

5. “The culprit must be determined by logical deductions — not by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession.” […] – The two criminals, Sheppard and Wargrave, disclose their motives and genuine explanations for their actions towards the end of both novels, making them plausible. Sheppard's motivation, on the one hand, is to keep Ackroyd from discovering that he was the one blackmailing Mrs. Ferrars and stopping him from going any further. In the case of Justice Wargrave, he sought justice since each of the guests was guilty of murder but had not been proven guilty by the court.

10. “The culprit must turn out to be a person who has played a more or less prominent part in the story — that is, a person with whom the reader is familiar and in whom he takes an interest.” – Both books demonstrate that the culprits, namely Dr. Sheppard, and Justice Wargrave, are introduced at an early stage of the novel, and play a significant part throughout the plot.
[...]

12. “There must be but one culprit, no matter how many murders are committed. The culprit may, of course, have a minor helper or co-plotter...” – The orchestrator in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is clearly Dr. Sheppard, but it can be argued that his "minor helper" could also be his sister, Caroline, because she is the town's number one gossip and may know things that the reader does not and may be unwilling to reveal because the murderer is her brother. However, in *And Then There Were None*, the orchestrator was only one individual who plotted the death of 10 people.
[...]

15. “The truth of the problem must at all times be apparent — provided the reader is shrewd enough to see it. By this I mean that if the reader, after learning the explanation for the crime, should reread the book, he would see that the solution had, in a sense, been staring him in the face-that all the clues really pointed to the culprit...” – Except for the one in *And Then There Were None*, the proof would be

pretty apparent to readers on a re-read of the works. Nonetheless, this is exemplified in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* when Sheppard is talking with his sister and states that "Surely if a woman committed a crime like murder, she'd be sufficiently cold-blooded to enjoy the fruits of it without any weak-minded sentimentality such as repentance" (Christie, 2022, p.11) Thus, the aforementioned Sheppard quotation about Mrs. Ferrars' suicide is one of these textual clues that appears to become more significant and informative following a second reading of the work. (Schaik, 2015, p.19)

[...]

18. "A crime in a detective story must never turn out to be an accident or a suicide. To end an odyssey of sleuthing with such an anti-climax is to hoodwink the trusting and kind-hearted reader." – In both works suicide is always present as an option to explain the murderers. Mostly, they are either committed by the criminals, or coerced to commit suicide due to circumstances. In the case of. Dr. Sheppard, he didn't want to surrender to the police, so he committed suicide through an overdose of Veronal, just like Mrs. Ferrars did. As for Lawrence Wargrave, at the moment he is done confessing the crimes, he admits that "It was my ambition to invent a murder mystery that no one could solve. But no artist, I now realize, can be satisfied with art alone. There is a natural craving for recognition which cannot be gainsaid." (Christie, 2011, pp.199-200) He finally ends up shooting himself on the head, "in accordance with the record kept by my fellow victims." (Christie, 2011, p. 200)

The above observations lead us to posit the conclusions formulated in the final section of this Bachelor's Thesis.

4. CONCLUSION

This thesis has mostly focused on the investigation and analysis of Christie's innovative structures and patterns, as well as the adherence to, or departure from specific norms deriving from ideas provided by classic mystery fiction scholars. This research was implemented on British novelist Agatha Christie's mystery novels *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *And Then There Were None*.

In order to provide a theoretical framework for the analysis of these novels against the backdrop of detective fiction, I resorted to the conceptual models developed by two theorists whose contributions to the study of detective fiction in the previous century provided a whole avenue of research as a result of their formulation of what we may call a grammar of this genre: Tzvetan Todorov and S.S. Van Dine.

In the first section of this thesis we looked at Christie’s skills and predominant patterns. One of her most renowned and accomplished techniques was to involve her readers in solving the suggested puzzle, imparting on them the same amount of knowledge as the detective gathers and designing a series of challenges and obstacles along the path of finding the truth. As a result, we can see in her works how the story of the crime as well as that of the investigation allow the reader to participate and try to solve the riddle in a clear-eyed way. However, Christie would occasionally go further and confound the puzzle by omitting the story of the investigation, and even allowing the reader to assume the position of the detective when the latter was absent from the plot, as happens in *And Then There Were None*.

The well-known and fairly distinct definitions of the genre as well as of its major subtypes, i.e. whodunits, and thrillers, supplied by the aforementioned authors were used in articulating the practical discussion in this thesis. Among several other factors, the setting, the victim, the suspects, the detective, the perpetrator, the narrative of the crime, and the story of the investigation constitute the key aspects that determine whether the narrative is a whodunit or a thriller.

In the following section I applied these ideas to both of Christie's novels so as to demonstrate the narrative strategies she employs in order to create a whodunit story or a

thriller story, both of which often remain wisely invisible to the reader, who feels misled when he arrives at the correct conclusion and ultimate discovery of the truth. More particularly Van Dine's first, second, third, fourth, fourth, fifth, tenth, twelfth, sixteenth, and eighteenth rules, as well as Todorov's definitions for "whodunit" and "thriller," were the theoretical constructs that I have tapped in greater depth.

After careful evaluation of both *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *And Then Were None* by analyzing them against the background provided by Todorov's theory and Van Dine's twenty rules, and by means of thorough comparison between them, it can be argued that even though they are structurally very similar to one another, differences can still be found. It is true that from a structural point of view we can see that there is a pattern which Agatha Christie follows in both works. Each novel begins with the characters being introduced to one another while congregated in one location for apparently circumstantial reasons, after which the crime occurs. The crime is followed by the inquest and the start of the investigation, which includes the body's identification, finding witnesses, questioning, the discovery of the murder weapon, the classification of suspects, and the concluding escape or capture. Despite the fact that they are written by the same author, both novels display quite different styles. They may be highly similar in many regards, yet their content and form are very different. So, while *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* may well fall under the umbrella term of crime fiction (and more specifically for the purpose of this essay, the whodunit story), *And Then There Were None* is not a typical piece of detective fiction, but rather a thriller.

Let one quotation from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* serve as an apt coda for this thesis: "Everything is simple, if you arrange the facts methodically." (Christie, 2022, p. 111).

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