MURDER AND CRIME-SOLVING STRATEGIES IN AGATHA CHRISTIE’S WORKS

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Abstract: In Agatha Christie’s literary career, which spanned over more than fifty years, the tally of murdered people approached three hundred. Her job as a nurse during World War I left a lasting mark on her career because during that period she developed a special interest in chemistry, which later influenced her writing style and using poison became her forte. Consequently, many of her literary characters fell victim to some kind of toxin. However, a large part of her works features a wide array of more violent and manual death causes. Most of those crimes are solved by one of Christie’s two most prominent detectives, either a professional Belgian detective Hercule Poirot or a white-haired old lady Jane Marple. Due to their different lifestyles, both their characters and investigation methods largely differ, but they are both successful when tackling a crime. This paper attempts to offer deeper insight into some of the murder methods Christie resorted to in her oeuvre while simultaneously depicting the strategies Monsieur Poirot and Miss Marple employ solving murders. Consequently, the two detectives will be compared based on their crime-solving approach, as well as their overall personas.

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

Agatha Christie is the best-selling novelist of all times. She is famous for her murder mysteries, in which she created a number of characters who became household names, most prominently Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple. The vastness of murders these two sleuths encounter is committed by both usual everyday weapons and some unconventional ones, but what Christie liked most were poisons – so much so that she even invented some. The appeal of her works lies in the originality of the murders, the reasons behind them, and the methods of solving them that only her mind could come up with and make plausible. Even though she said that the outsider is most often the perpetrator, in her novels
there are often no outsiders, since she manages to provide most of the characters with a motive strong enough to commit the crime. The aim of this paper is thus to offer a discussion of murder and crime-solving strategies in Agatha Christie’s work, which make them so attractive to readers. Beginning with a brief insight into mystery fiction as a genre and Agatha Christie’s importance for murder mysteries, the paper will discuss the ways Christie *kills* (or attempts to *kill*) the victims in some of her works, with the special emphasis on poison, after which Poirot and Marple will be portrayed and compared based on their appearance, demeanour, and approach to crime-solving.

**Mystery Fiction and Agatha Christie**

According to John Cawelti, mystery fiction is a formula story centring around “the investigation and discovery of hidden secrets, the discovery usually leading to some benefit for the character(s) with whom the reader identifies” (42), with its problem having “a rational and desirable solution” (42-43), which is in accordance with “the underlying moral fantasy” present in the genre. It is also often referred to as crime fiction, detective fiction or murder mystery – a literary genre in which the reader is asked to help solve the crime, its essential ingredients being an element of surprise mixed with an element of detection. However, Carl D. Malmgren argues that mystery, detective, and crime fiction are not exactly the same, but rather three basic forms of something we term murder fiction (1) as they differ in the following:

1. pure mystery fiction involves “the isolation of clues, the making of deductions from these clues, and the attempt to place the various clues in their rational place in a complete scheme of cause and effect” (Cawelti 43).

2. detective fiction “starts with a murder or theft, and ends when the identity of the criminal and the details of the crime are revealed. The sleuth’s function is to find clues and to ingeniously solve the mystery. His ratiocination, his power of reasoning, and his observation of hitherto unnoticed facts leads to the restoration of order, which happens at the end of the story” (Dechêne 16).

3. crime fiction is, broadly speaking, “all literary material, fiction or fact, that has crime, or the appearances of crime, at its centre and as its *raison d’être*” (Worthington, *Key Concepts in Crime Fiction* 13).

Joel Goldman also asserts that mystery fiction and crime fiction are somewhat different, since crime fiction is a broader term. He defines
crime fiction as “the blanket term used to describe books that deal with any aspect of crime – including those who commit and solve it” (Goldman, par. 2). In mysteries, the focus of investigation is determining who is responsible for a certain criminal event the plot revolves around, and the protagonist is usually a detective or an amateur investigator who uses their abilities to solve the mystery (Goldman, par. 3). There is usually a closed circle of suspects and each of them has both a motive and an opportunity to commit the crime. The crime-solving protagonist does it by using the facts and clues that were previously presented to the reader throughout the book (Wilhelm 142). Malmgren also states some of the basic characteristics of the mystery genre: there is usually one significant scene of crime (village, estate, university, etc.); the perpetrator is driven by one of the four Ls of mystery fiction mentioned by P. D. James: “love, lust, loathing, lucre” (qtd. in Malmgren 14); premeditation implies that there is a previous connection between the perpetrator and the victim; psychopaths are not acceptable (since they would eliminate the need for the motive, which is extremely relevant in mystery fiction), etc. (13-18). Mystery, crime, and detective fiction, as well as detective story, mystery-detective fiction, and whodunit, can be used interchangeably to describe Agatha Christie’s scope of work (Bargainnier 2).

Christie’s oeuvre can be classified as representing a subgenre of mystery fiction – the cozy or classical mystery (Bargainnier 7) – “a subset of the genre that uses a small group of people in a cosy or familiar setting and avoids gruesome details and violence” (Devereux 6). As one of the pioneers of not only the subgenre but of murder fiction in general as well, Christie was praised by her contemporaries and dubbed one of the masters of classic detective stories, alongside E. C. Bentley and Dorothy Sayers. She belonged to the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, a term coined by Howard Haycraft and used to represent murder mysteries written between the two world wars (Malmgren 4). She is the only female author of the Golden Age who created female detective protagonists, most prominently exemplified by Miss Marple, her prime woman investigator. The reader is fully engaged in solving the crime, since none of the clues used by the investigator(s) are concealed from the reader (as vowed in an oath designed by The London Detection Club in 1928). “Though most people think of detective fiction as principally entertainment, which it is, a case can be made for its being the most intellectual of popular literary forms, and this is especially true of the works of the Golden Age” (Bargainnier 8). Her novels always feature a large number of suspects (the lowest number is four – in Cards on the Table), all of whom are roughly equally considered by the investigators.
Marple and Poirot as Christie’s two main investigators also share the belief that anyone might commit murder (Merrill 88-93). “Each character is of interest to us, for each is a genuine suspect. No one can be fully developed, however, for the very nature of the game requires that Christie spread her attention about equally among her relatively large cast” (Merrill 89).

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

**Murder Methods in Christie’s Mystery Novels**

The appeal of Christie’s mysteries lies in her choice of murder weapons as well, which are as diverse as arsenic, foxglove, thallium, sandbag, water, cleaver, even nicotine and a ukulele string... While many of Christie’s novels features deaths related to poison, in most of her short stories the characters are not murdered in that manner. In spite of her preference for poison, she also uses a large variety of other weapons, knowing that using solely poisons would be too repetitive: “They can’t be poisoned every time but I am happier when they are” (qtd. in Ait Abdelmalek, par. 2).

Furthermore, if we look at seven most common homicide methods in 2016, listed by WISQARS ¹ – death caused by firearms,
cutting/piercing, suffocation, striking, poisoning, fire/burning, and drowning, we realize that Christie used all of those and many more to end the lives of her characters, which confirms her versatility as an author. When an author opts for a certain method, they need to know precisely how it works in order not to make logical or factual blunders, which is what Christie always managed to avoid.2

The greatest proficiency, however, Christie shows when dealing with poison as a murder weapon/murder method. Out of her sixty-six novels, forty-one included a murder, attempted murder or suicide in which a poison was involved (Bonow Bardell 13). This occurs because, as Christie herself states, “I know nothing about pistols and revolvers, which is why I usually kill off my characters with a blunt instrument or better with poisons. Besides, poisons are neat and clean and really exciting” (qtd. in Havlíčková 17). Christie is praised for her usage of poison since her murders are not only accurate but also described in everyday language, which makes them equally understandable to experts in toxicology and complete laymen (Harkup 10).

Christie’s novel widely praised for its application and description of poison is The Mysterious Affair at Styles. “In none of her other ‘poison’ novels and stories does she include as much information concerning the toxic agent as she does in The Mysterious Affair at Styles” (Bonow Bardell 16). That should not come as a surprise because this was her debut novel, which she began writing in 1916 and published in 1920, so she had plenty of time to perfect the most intricate details of the circumstances of Mrs Inglethorp’s death. Furthermore, that was the period in which Christie volunteered as a nurse and as a chemist’s assistant, working with poisons immediately, so she was able to channel that knowledge into the plot. Interestingly, this novel introduces the character of Cynthia Murdoch, who also works as a chemist’s assistant, possibly a result of Christie’s real-life experience.

The plot revolves around Mrs Emily Inglethorp, a wealthy aged woman. She has recently married a younger man, Alfred Inglethorp, whom Emily’s family does not approve of, considering him to be too odd and a gold digger. Not long after the remarriage, Mrs Inglethorp suffers some kind of a seizure and, with every form of help being in vain, she soon dies. The doctors realize that her convulsions were too “peculiar” and “tetanic” (Christie, Styles 49-50) to be a result of something natural, and require a post-mortem. The results confirm Captain Hastings’ (who

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2In some of her works, she explained the circumstances of the victim’s death so well that she was accused of offering a handbook for potential murderers (Twilley, par. 10).
also witnessed Mrs Emily’s death) beliefs – she was poisoned. The fatal poison was strychnine, “one of the most deadly poisons known to mankind” (Christie, Styles 86). Back at the time, acquiring strychnine was not very uncommon and anyone could obtain it, and Cynthia, who worked in a dispensary, had direct access to it. Poirot starts working on the case. At first, Alfred is believed to be the culprit, since he has no alibi and was the heir at the time of his wife’s death. Soon after, the attention shifts to John, one of her stepsons, who becomes the main suspect, but a suspicious Poirot continues investigating, seeing that some pieces of the puzzle simply do not fit. His first impression and intuition do not fail him – he realizes that Alfred is indeed responsible for his wife’s death, but with the help of his alleged cousin and Emily’s confidante, Miss Howard.

Poirot’s reconstruction reveals that Mrs Inglethorp had trouble sleeping. She would pick up a sleeping tonic, which contained harmless amount of strychnine, every two weeks. Also, on some occasions, she would take some sleeping powder (i.e. potassium bromide). In large amounts, mixing potassium bromide with sleeping tonic would cause strychnine from the tonic to crystallize at the bottom of the tonic bottle. If the bottle is not shaken regularly (which was ensured by Miss Howard), the last dose of tonic from the bottle would contain a lethal amount of strychnine (Christie, Styles 312-13; Roth, par. 4). Miss Howard was well aware of how long it took Mrs Emily to finish a bottle of tonic, so she was able to pinpoint the exact day in which she would take the last dose, and therefore prepare an alibi for both her and her cousin/lover, but also to plant some clues that would incriminate John Cavendish. They did not count on the possibility that Mrs Emily would miss a day and take the lethal dose a day after, which made their alibis rocky and easier for Poirot to crack.

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

Simultaneously with her literary career, she kept conducting thorough research on drugs and poisons to be able to use them in her novels without making logical errors. She was in touch with many experts, asking them about substances and their properties. During World War II, she volunteered yet again to work in a dispensary to expand her knowledge, this time in London. She would work there almost every day (except on Sundays), yet she managed to be extremely prolific during that period, writing twelve novels for the duration of the war. Another perk of her lifelong research is that she learned so much about so many poisons that she was comfortable using such a wide array of them properly, so she would rarely repeat the same toxins. Apart from the aforementioned strychnine, arsenic is the poison that people associate the most with Christie, but actually she used it only eight times (four times in novels and four in short stories), which, compared to more than 300 of her victims, is a small proportion. She even came up with her own poisons, e.g., Serenite, Benvo, and Calmo, but only one fabricated poison was the murder weapon (Harkup 13-19). Her use of poisons was at such a high level that those dealing with the poisoned would remember reading her novels and short stories and link the symptoms to certain poisons, thus saving lives.3

Despite poisons being Christie’s favourite and most frequent method of killing her characters, there is still a significant number of her novels in which she does not use toxins to murder the victims. One of

3A very well-known example of that is her 1961 novel The Pale Horse, in which she described thallium poisoning. In 1971, the police were able to catch a serial killer who poisoned his victims with thallium. A doctor who had read the novel saw the connection between the poisonings in a factory in London and the book and identified Graham Young, a worker at the factory, as the culprit. Also, in 1977 in London, a year after Christie’s death, doctors were unable to set the diagnosis for a girl suffering from a serious illness, but one of the nurses saw the similarities between the girl’s symptoms and the symptoms of a victim from the novel, and the girl was indeed soon diagnosed with and treated for thallium poisoning (Lennartson 610; Aronson 205).
the most famous novels of that kind is *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934). Mr Ratchett/Cassetti, the man whose murder Poirot is investigating, used to be an extremely despicable criminal back in the USA, who escaped after kidnapping and killing three-year-old Daisy Armstrong. He is hunted down by friends and family of the Armstrongs and found dead in the Orient Express compartment after being inflicted twelve knife wounds. With the help of Monsieur Bouc and Dr Constantine, Poirot manages to conclude that the murder was conducted by twelve passengers of the Orient Express, all of whom were in a way connected to the afflicted family and cared for them enough to kill Ratchett. Since he managed to escape justice on a legal technicality, the twelve perpetrators decided to take the matter into their own hands and become a kind of “jury.” Each of them (except Countess Andrenyi, who was replaced by her husband) entered his compartment and inflicted a stab wound. That way no one could know whose stab was the lethal one, so they were all able to share the blame. This unusual death with twelve murderers is somewhat different than other Christie’s deaths, who avoided gore as often as possible. However, since Ratchett was an exceptionally vile person, such solution seems highly appropriate. Because of his nature, Poirot does something he usually never would – he decides not to turn in the members of the jury and keep the truth he discovered only among the passengers on the train.

Another murder method in Christie’s arsenal is drowning, featured in her short story “Death by Drowning.” Though not very popular, this story is unusual because of murder by drowning, uncommon for Christie. When Rose Emmott, a pregnant girl from St. Mary Mead drowns, everyone believes it is a suicide, but not Miss Marple. She approaches Henry Clithering, her acquaintance, who she believes has enough power to make the police look into the case a bit more closely, and hands him a piece of paper on which she wrote the name of the person whom she suspects to be Rose’s killer. The autopsy results prove that Rose’s death was indeed a murder. Three men are considered the main suspects and thus interrogated: Rex Sandford, a London architect who got Rose pregnant despite having a fiancée back home, considered to be the murderer by both the villagers and the police, Tom Emmott, Rose’s father, strict and impulsive, dissatisfied with his daughter’s pregnancy, and Joe Ellis, the loyal but hurting ex-boyfriend who lives with a middle-aged widow, Mrs Bartlett, who provides an alibi for Joe.

While everyone blames Sandford because of several incriminating circumstances and his non-existent alibi, Clithering is doubtful and manages to confirm Miss Marple’s allegations. Sure that the name on the paper is the right one, he goes to Ellis and identifies his landlady as
the killer. Mrs Bartlett thought that Rose was “flighty” and “a bad lot” (Christie, “Drowning” 308), but knew that Joe was still in love with her and that he would take her back despite the pregnancy now that she was abandoned by Sandford. Since she herself was in love with Joe, she decided that she would not let that happen, and when she ran into Rose on the bridge, she pushed her into the water. When she got home, she pretended that she wanted to give Joe an alibi by saying that she was with him the whole evening, yet instead that alibi was meant to protect her.

Christie’s Sleuths: Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple

In addition to a limited line of actions connected almost exclusively to crime, mystery formula is unimaginable without a specific cast of characters, boiling down to a criminal, a victim, several witnesses, and, of course a professional or an unofficial crime-solving protagonist. Christie’s contribution to the world of crime-solving protagonists includes two most famous, if we disregard Poe’s C. Auguste Dupin and Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes, world sleuths: Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot.

When creating her two sleuths, Christie drew inspiration from numerous sources. Rooted in the authorial writings of proto-detective Thomas De Quincey whose “enquiry into the mechanics of murder and the attempt to analyse the psychology of the perpetrator and the emotions of the victim, while prompted by a possibly unhealthy fascination with violence, locate him as an investigating agent” (Worthington, The Rise of the Detective 27) and Samuel Warren’s fictional “Passages from the Diary of a Late Physician” (serialised in Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine from 1830 to 1837) introducing “the case structure that will typify later detective fiction, and, in the figure of the observing and analytic physician, explore a discursive space that will later be occupied by the disciplinary detective in the private sphere” (Worthington, The Rise of the Detective 46-47), the characters of Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot show many similarities to Edgar Allan Poe’s Chevalier Auguste Dupin, the first detective in Western literature and Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes. They all share the passion for ratiocination, offer the answer to the question whodunit? by mostly relying on logic, retrospect observation and deduction, and have a helper, named or unnamed, assisting them in solving the crime.4 In

addition to Dupin and Holmes, it has to be noted that Christie’s sleuth characters were influenced by the detective protagonists in the novels by Anna Katharine Green, one of the first American detective fiction writers, who is “sometimes dubbed ‘The Mother of Detective Fiction.’

Writing between 1878 and 1923, Green created two women detectives, one a spinster and the other a young woman. The spinster, Amelia Butterworth, who made her debut in That Affair Next Door (1897), was a forerunner of Agatha Christie’s Miss Jane Marple” (Abbott 1893). Lastly, Christie’s sleuths are, in part, indebted to literary creations of Mary Roberts Rinehart, another American detective fiction writer who wrote at the turn of the twentieth century and whose books set the stage for Christie. So, what makes Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple similar to their literary predecessors yet so uniquely appealing to readers?

Of Belgian origin, Hercule Poirot is a retired police officer who moved to England after World War I, where he began his career as a detective and an investigator (Havlíčková 38). He is an example of an eccentric, well-organized, and pedantic person. To him, the best compliment a person can get is that they are systematic: “A ‘man of method’ was, in Poirot’s estimation, the highest praise that could be bestowed on any individual” (Christie, Styles 90). He is extremely finicky, obsessed with neatness and feels restless if something is out of line. Gualtieri asserts that his meticulousness goes to such an extent that it even led some critics to believe that he suffers from OCD (22), as exemplified by the statement that “he was uncomfortable if his bank balance wasn’t exactly 444 pounds, 44 shillings and 4 pence” (19). Considering his complete appearance and behaviour (his moustache, height, the shape of his head, fastidiousness etc.), one cannot overlook the fact that he is depicted very comically, as if he was meant to be a target of mockery. Such a characterization was Christie’s way of introducing just the right amount of comedy in otherwise serious mystery works.

As a man of great experience from his previous career, Poirot is familiar with a number of methods of discovering criminals. Bargainnier claims Poirot’s methods of detection to be psychology and order and method, and Havlíčková adds logic, sense, knowledge, feelings, and psychological examination of the suspects. Just as Christie does not change Poirot’s personality over time, she does not change his investigation methods as well. He always considers psychology to be crucial while solving a crime, even more relevant than the clues themselves because all crimes are psychological in nature (Bargainnier 59-60; Havlíčková 43). He searches for clues while watching others and
listening to their conversations and gossips, knowing that a person lying cannot do it all the time – sooner or later, some illogicality will emerge, and he will be there to notice it.

Yet, what he is most proud of are his little grey cells. He considers them to be his biggest forte: “‘This affair must all be unravelled from within.’ He tapped his forehead. ‘These little grey cells. It is ‘up to them’– as you say over here’” (Christie, *Styles* 257-58). They are one of his most prominent characteristics and Christie came up with that term even before she devised his name: “And he should be very brainy – he should have little grey cells of the mind–that was a good phrase: I must remember that–yes, he would have little grey cells” (Christie, *Autobiography* ch. 5). He relies on them more than on anything else, claiming them to be more relevant than the collected clues. “Poirot affirms more than once that he can come nearer to the solution of any problem by lying back in an armchair and using the little grey cells than by sniffing the ground in search of tangible clues” (Bunson 75). He insists that “the secret of detection was to use what [...] he called ‘the little grey cells.’ You can’t collect your evidence before you begin thinking, he meant: because thinking means asking questions” (Collingwood qtd. in Bargainnier 60). His brain is trained so well that his cells became infallible. Yet, Campbell reminds that Poirot’s little grey cells failed him completely (only) once. While he was still a beginner in the Belgian police, he failed to apprehend the relevance of a blue lid on a pink box. That instance keeps haunting him all his life (Campbell ch. 4).

Poirot proves that resorting to thorough thinking without having any access to physical evidence can be enough to solve a crime. “‘One does not, you know, employ merely the muscles. I do not need to bend and measure the footprints and pick up the cigarette ends and examine the bent blades of grass. It is enough for me to sit back in my chair and think. It is this’ – he tapped his eggshaped head – ‘this, that functions!’” (Christie, *Pigs* ch. 1). Tangible clues are not crucial for him anyway: “My success, let me tell you, has been founded on the psychology – the eternal why of human behaviour” (Christie, *Pigs* ch. 3) as “[psychology in crime, [...] is [...] [his] specialty” (Christie, *Pigs* ch. 3). In the end, he proves that his little grey cells combined with psychology suffice when he needs to solve a crime.

Poirot’s female counterpart, Miss Jane Marple, is Christie’s most famous female detective. Prior to Christie, not many mystery writers dared to use a woman as the protagonist and main investigator in their works, let alone make it an amateur spinster seemingly affected by senescence. She may look very old, but she is still as sharp as a whip:
Because she is gentle, elderly and very proper, Marple does not seem to pose a threat to anyone. In fact people tend to overlook her – at first. But they are soon brought up short, for this Victorian spinster is a powerhouse. Her deceptive appearance and lulling naïveté disarm criminals (and readers), who are caught off guard until they feel the cool steel beneath that fleecy wool. (Maida and Spornick 108)

Judging from her appearance and demeanour, no one would ever suspect that this old lady is in fact an amateur detective who investigates murders. Miss Marple’s “plain appearances, gossiping conversation and ever-lasting knitting needles often mislead people to underestimating her as simply a curious old maid” (Xu 97).

Being one of the first, if not the very first, female detectives, Miss Marple has become the crux of critical debates on her possible contribution to the feminist movement. Some, like Vipond, posit that Miss Marple is not a very empowering figure as Christie was very tradition-wise and her female characters’ “main mental capacity seems to be intuitive; even Miss Marple, who is praised by her distinguished male admirers like Sir Henry Clithering for her wonderfully (and surprisingly) logical brain, is so discursive in speech that it seems unbelievable that she can think straight” (10). Similarly, Devereux claims that, although very successful, Miss Marple “does little to challenge gender boundaries and instead revels in her Victorian upbringing” (19). A point in favour of that view is her glorification of the past, less progressive periods. Born in the 1850s, Miss Marple is fond of tradition and reminiscent of the old days; in her, “Christie managed to capture […] the final life spark of a dying generation” (Maida and Spornick 108):

“Miss Marple fondly remembers the days when parlourmaids used a brush and dustpan instead of ‘a virulent Hoover’ with which the lady from the Development fills the cottage with noise each morning” (Zemboy 335).

On the other hand, Cynthia D. McPeters praises her abilities, arguing that she uses feminized discourse, i.e. gossip, to solve murder cases: “[in] signifying the success of feminized discourse in solving murder cases that male characters are unable to settle when relying on conventional and formal rhetorical modes, Christie contradicts established rhetorical standards, and Marple reveals a feminist focus, successfully utilizing avenues of communication associated with women” (3). Berna Köseoğlu further asserts that by creating Miss Marple and giving her the ability to compete with and even be better
than specialized male investigators, she enhances the position of women in the male-dominated society and breaks the prejudices present in the patriarchal society that women cannot investigate and be rational (134-36). Lastly, there is Alice Bolin who states that she is indeed a feminist figure assisting in the feminization of crime as “Miss Marple mysteries are ones in which female news and knowledge are vindicated, throwing a smiling side eye at mansplanations and male authorities” (par. 2).

Miss Marple “begins her investigation by looking for patterns or regularities,” and once she recognizes the pattern, she is able to find what is missing and connects the dots (Moses and Knutsen 209). She owes a lot of her success to her curiosity, large circle of friends and acquaintances, and to the life experience she has gathered living in St. Mary Mead. As she is unobtrusive, she goes under the radar while monitoring people and events around her. Based on her observations, on the tiny details she picks up, which a not so well-trained eye normally would not, and on her intuition, she succeeds in getting to the bottom of what happened. “Surveillance, coupled with her knowledge of humanity, is how she solves crimes: Marple watches people and reads them against what she knows about human nature” (Devereux 19).

Miss Marple is very suspicious as well, always taking what others say with a grain of salt, and not at all naïve: “People, I find, are apt to be far too trustful. I’m afraid that I have a tendency always to believe the worst. Not a nice trait. But so often justified by subsequent events” (Christie, Announced ch. 8). Faye Stewart ascribes her abilities of solving mysteries the authorities are unable to solve to her curiosity, shrewdness and infallible memory, despite her advanced age (35). Just as she likes to ponder in peace while searching for the solution, she also tends to keep a low profile after solving the case, leaving the impression that she does not do any of it for the fame, but only for the satisfaction of obtaining justice. “Miss M’s crime-solving is all mental, deduced over cups of tea. When she is proved right, and later thanked, she offers up only a smile and a simple ‘Not at all...’” (O’Dell 150).

The Comparison of Christie’s Two Most Famous Sleuths

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

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

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

The frequency of appearance and the level of engagement in the novels are just a drop in the sea of things that separate the Marple and Poirot novels. To comprehend them, it is also important to touch upon the way Christie sets the mystery and to mention the process of its solving. In the Marple novels, “there are fewer suspects and clues, as indeed there must be, given our distance from the crucial evidence, but arriving at Miss Marple’s solution is still much more difficult than arriving at Poirot’s” (Merrill 95-96). Also, in the Poirot works, the reader becomes aware of the new pieces of evidence at the same time as Poirot or right after he acquires them, whereas Miss Marple remains more mysterious, frequently withholds clues from the reader, and often exposes something she knew all along in the very end (Merrill 96; Xu 99).
When it comes to the setting, the Poirot stories are much more diverse. He travels quite often and solves mysteries even during transit (boat, plane, train). His novels are set all around – in villages, cities, in England, abroad (some of those locations being Egypt, the Mediterranean Sea, and even Croatia). Miss Marple also likes to travel, but she is not that adventurous. She mostly travels to villages or small towns to see her friends. With the exception of the Caribbean and London, Miss Marple does not travel abroad or to big cities and is mainly very local, restricted to St. Mary Mead or some other non-urban locations. Bargainnier stresses that “nearly all of the works in which she appears involve her village of St. Mary Mead to some extent, and many occur solely there” (28).

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

A difference arises also in their financial position. Poirot worked his entire life, and in retirement he continued to have a source of income. That can be seen based on several facts. First, in some novels he is shown to have a secretary. That means that his business is flourishing, since he is able to pay salaries to Miss Lemon. Next, he is so famous that he can pick the cases he wants to solve and turn down the ones he finds unappealing. Also, substantial fees are mentioned on several occasions, for example, in Murder on the Orient Express Ratchett promises Poirot twenty thousand dollars in return for his services, but Poirot turns him down because he does not like him, despite the money that is offered (Christie 44-46). He confirms that money is not what he is after on various occasions, for example, in Five Little Pigs: “I assure you, Mr Blake, I am really interested. It is not just a matter of money with me. I
genuinely want to recreate the past” (Christie, *Pigs* ch.3). As a result of his success, he has accumulated enough money not to have financial worries. As for Miss Marple, there is not so much information available regarding her finances. It is mentioned that her successful nephew Raymond pays for her holidays and gives her money, but the exact amount is not stated. One can only speculate if it is only enough to make ends meet or whether Raymond helps his aunt with substantial amounts. Whatever the case may be, Poirot is much richer than Miss Marple.

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

Poirot and Miss Marple have many similarities as well. First and foremost, neither of them looks like a typical detective. According to Havlíčková, by creating Poirot “Agatha Christie created probably the most emasculate detective figure like a parody of typical heroic detective in terms of appearance and manners” (29). Miss Marple is also an atypical sleuth, being so old and seemingly frail. Still, they both prove that appearances are often deceiving. Furthermore, they are both old, unmarried, single, and without proximate relatives, which makes sense because if they had been created with spouses and/or someone depending on them, they would not have been able to wander around and solve crimes. Another feature that they both share, but which is more present in Miss Marple, is their ability to get on with people much younger than themselves. Also, at the moment of their creation, i.e. their first appearance, they were both already rather old. It is uncertain whether they age accordingly or if Christie decided that years would pass by slower for them. “To attempt to determine [Poirot’s] age is a waste of time. By strict chronology, assuming retirement at sixty-five, he would be over 135 by the time of *Curtain*, the last novel” (Bargainnier 45). Zemboy asserts Miss Marple’s age was specified as eighty-nine in 1957 in *What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw* (333). Knowing that she appeared in 1930 as a woman between sixty-five and seventy and that she was
still investigating in *Nemesis* in 1971 means that Christie was inconsistent with her age as well.

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

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

**Conclusion**

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

Based on the analysis of several Christie’s works, it is to be concluded that novels including poisons differ from those where there is no administering of poison in more than just the murder method. Christie pays more attention to details in the novels where there is poison, partly because she knew more about poison than any other murder method, but also because the effects of a poison require more explaining than the effects of e.g. a revolver or a dagger. Also, fewer suspects can be excluded based on their physical characteristics in novels featuring poison. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, both men and women, old and young, are equally fit to be the killer because planting poison does not require great physical strength, whereas in *Murder on the Orient Express* the doctor explicitly says that some stab wounds are too slight to be lethal (it is for the theatricality why all twelve passengers are considered to be the killers, but the lethal wound was almost definitely administered by a man).

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

The execution of such murders is often much simpler and more anticlimactic, even with Christie’s usually thorough elaboration.
of that kind. One way or another, they both manage to solve the puzzle despite all the difficulties, leaving the reader in awe of their abilities.

Works Cited


UBOJSTVO I STRATEGIJE RJEŠAVANJA ZLOČINA U DJELIMA AGATHE CHRISTIE


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