# The portrayal of male and female murderers in selected novels of Agatha Christie

**Dolski, Dora**

Sveučilište u Zadru

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Sveučilišni diplomski studij

Anglistika; smjer: nastavnički

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Zadar, 2024.

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Sadržaj mojega rada u potpunosti odgovara sadržaju obranjenoga i nakon obrane uređenoga rada.

Zadar, 2024.

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# 1. Introduction

Detective fiction, a literary subgenre of crime and mystery fiction, has been immensely popular and has captivated the attention of both scholars and the general public for decades. This genre, with its intricate narratives, enigmatic characters, complex puzzles, intriguing and suspenseful plotlines and unexpected plot twists, serves not only as a source of entertainment but also provides valuable insights into human nature, moral dilemmas, the concept of justice, and historical and sociocultural aspects of society. From the early detective stories of Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle to modern psychological thrillers and crime novels, detective fiction has evolved significantly over time, adapting to the changing literary landscape and reflecting the shifting societal and cultural values of each era. Agatha Christie, acclaimed as the "Queen of Crime", is considered one of the most influential and celebrated authors in the history of detective fiction, renowned for her groundbreaking contributions to the whodunit genre and carefully crafted plots that challenged conventional notions of guilt and innocence, making it possible for anyone to be the perpetrator of a crime. Since many scholars, critics and academics tend to focus more on the figures of Agatha Christie's most famous detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple and less on her fictional villains, the prime concern of this master's thesis is to analyse Christie's male murderers Justice Wargrave in *And Then There Were None* (1939), Dr James Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) and female murderers Jane Wilkinson in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933) and Bella Tanios in *Dumb Witness* (1937) in order to address the topic of gender representation in detective fiction, that is, within the Golden Age of detective fiction, with a focus on the most prominent representative of that period, the author Agatha Christie..

The first section provides a brief overview of crime and detective fiction, specifically focusing on the period known as the "Golden Age" in which the genre experienced a surge in popularity and established many of the enduring tropes and conventions associated with detective stories. Furthermore, it describes Agatha Christie's personal life and literary works as well as her impact on the development of the detective genre. Moreover, it offers insight into the historical and social context of Interwar Britain (from 1918 to 1939) in order to understand the period in which the novels were written. The changes after the First World War were also reflected in shifting or renegotiating traditional gender roles, especially those of women who began to participate more actively in male-dominated English society.

The second section concentrates on Christie's male murderers; Justice Wargrave and Dr. James Sheppard. The analysis of both novels and characters will be done through Michael Foucault's concept of power which according to him is not fixed, but rather dynamic; that is, power can be represented through symbols, knowledge, language, behaviour including personality, and all forms of human relationships. Furthermore, power is demonstrated through various forms of crimes such as murder, blackmailing, suicide, etc., and turns into a mode of action enacted upon others that both of these male characters embody. Another influential theory in the field of gender studies is Raewyn Connell's theory of masculinity which provides insight into the diverse social constructions of masculine identity, especially hegemonic masculinity which constitutes dominant and powerful qualities such as activity, rationality, and violence adopted by both male murderers to simultaneously commit a crime and conform to the expected traditional gender norms of British patriarchal society at that time. Judith Butler suggests that gender is not an essential quality but a repeated enactment, meaning that what society deems as "masculine" behaviour – strength, aggression, dominance – are roles that men perform rather than innate characteristics.

The third section deals with Christie's female murderers, Jane Wilkinson and Bella Tanios. Concerning the theoretical framework, I draw upon Judith Butler's gender theory, in which she argues that masculinity and femininity are simply performances and that there is no original basis for gender. Thus, I use Butler's theory to highlight the way female criminals, as masculine females, upset the gender binary and reveal transgressive possibilities. Moreover, several scholarly works will be used to introduce the concept of "New Woman", a construct developed by feminists to advocate for the notion of women who embody a combination of traditionally masculine traits alongside their inherent feminine qualities. In order to demonstrate how both of these Christie's female characters embody the new roles of female offenders and criminals and challenge the society's understanding of traditional gender beliefs, this thesis will rely upon the sources which talk about the representations of women's unconventional deviance and how they are perceived by the society.

Thus, drawing upon theoretical frameworks from gender studies and incorporating relevant scholarly works, the aim of this thesis is to examine Agatha Christie's male and female murders, with a specific focus on their criminal behaviour and actions, in order to understand how these characters embody and disrupt or defy traditional gender norms and societal expectations during the interwar period, particularly within the context of power dynamics and the constructs of masculinity and femininity.

## 2. The “Golden Age” of Detective Fiction

The expression ‘The Golden Age of Detective Fiction’ refers to the period generally placed between 1918 and 1945, during which detective fiction experienced enormous popularity and significant development, especially in the United Kingdom. The distinctive style that characterised this period was the crime novel, a novel with elaborate plots, logical puzzles, and a strong focus on the figure of the investigator, amateur or professional, concentrating on solving crimes.

A forerunner of this period was Charles Dickens, who in 1850 followed the activities of London detectives and reported on them in the newspaper households; the figure of the modern, professional detective who uses his technical background to solve cases with a scientific approach emerged around the middle of the 20th century, with the proliferation of criminal offences within the family sphere. At the beginning of the 19th century, a trend emerged whereby a criminal turned detective could achieve fame and wealth by revealing his life story. Among them was, Eugène-François Vidocq who inspired authors such as Honoré de Balzac in ‘le Père Goriot’ with Vautrin and Hugo. At this time, women were still excluded from the productive and political life of the cities or relegated to second-class roles; women were not allowed to confront the reality of the street and, therefore, even joining the police was not allowed. It was not until the First World War that we saw the first female patrols in Britain, and they were usually entrusted with policing prostitution rings. Thanks to their skills of disguise and persuasion, women had nevertheless gained an important role in the espionage activities of traditional detectives.

Émile Gaboriau (1832-1873) was the first writer to dramatize detective investigations and created three prototypes for his fictional detectives, that of the eccentric amateur, the zealous and brilliant professional and the charismatic and brilliant outsider. His techniques would later be adopted by the Scottish writer Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, for his Sherlock Holmes, by the authors of French detective stories such as Maurice LeBlanc (1864-1947) creator of the French answer to Holmes Arsène Lupin and would be an inspiration for all Golden Age authors.

Golden Age stories focus on a central enigma, usually a murder, which engages the detective by requiring the use of deduction and logical reasoning, and in which the authors try to involve the readers, inviting them to solve the mystery together with the detective.

The setting in which the story takes place is often an enclosed or otherwise well-defined place, a country house, a train, or a small village, in which the small group of suspects is confined; the solution of the mystery, in this way, takes on the conformation of a closed puzzle.

The characters are, more often than not, stereotypes: there is the eccentric and charismatic detective, the butler who inevitably assumes the role of the suspect, the usually well-to-do victim, and the list of suspects, each well characterised and with particular histories. These characters often follow certain patterns and types that induce a sense of familiarity in the reader and are involved in initially hidden intrigues that gradually come to light generating involvement and twists. The detective uses his skills and intuition to predict the criminal's moves by coming to think in a similar way and reconstructing his original trauma, almost becoming his double.

The writing is simple, with little graphic violence or psychological anguish, and focuses more on intellect than emotion, and the atmosphere is often serene and calm: the novel wants to involve the reader, to draw him or her in; it is as if the reader were immersed in a game, the game of solving the riddle and finding the culprit.

During the Golden Age, several authors adopted rules or codes to ensure that this game with the reader was fair and some authors published more or less brilliant rules on how to write detective stories; among them was Ronald Knox, author of *Ten Commandments* for detective fiction, also known as *Decalogue.*

These rules are based on what the 'Detection Club' (an association of mystery writers founded in 1930) established with regard to fair play, i.e. that the reader should have access to all the clues needed to solve the mystery; they are given below:

1. The criminal should be introduced early in the story, but their thoughts must not be revealed to the reader.
2. Supernatural or unnatural forces are automatically excluded.
3. Only one secret room or passage is permitted.
4. No previously unknown poisons can be used, nor any device that requires an extensive scientific explanation at the conclusion.
5. No character of Chinese descent should be involved in the story.
6. The detective should never be aided by an accident, nor should he have an inexplicable intuition that turns out to be correct.
7. The detective must not be the one who commits the crime.

8. The detective is required to reveal any clues he comes across.
9. The detective's somewhat dull companion, the Watson, should not hide any thoughts he has from the reader; his intelligence should be just a bit lower than that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers and other doubles should not be introduced unless the reader has been properly prepared for their presence. ("The Ten Commandments of Detective Fiction by Ronald Knox")

Among the most important writers of the Golden Age are Agatha Christie, considered the queen of the detective story, famous for her intricate novels with iconic characters such as Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, her gripping plots and surprising endings, Margery Allingham, creator of the enigmatic and sophisticated detective Albert Campion, and appreciated for her narrative style that combines mystery and humour, and Anthony Berkeley, who under the pseudonym Francis Iles, innovated the genre by introducing psychological elements and character analysis into his novels, challenging the conventions of the classic detective story.

It is worth mentioning Dorothy L. Sayers, known for her complex and refined novels featuring Lord Peter Wimsey, the acclaimed author Josephine Tey, known for her detective Alan Grant and her ability to fuse historical investigation and detective fiction, Michael Innes, author of the famous detective Sir John Appleby and known for his cultured style imbued with subtle humour.

One should also note authors such as Edmund Crispin, creator of the eccentric literature professor Gervase Fen, the new Zealander Ngaio Marsh, beloved of the theatre and author of the character of inspector Roderick Alleyn, Freeman Wills Crofts, pioneer of the deductive detective story and famous for his methodical and rational detective, Inspector French.

Inventor of the "inverted novel", R. Austin Freeman created the forensic investigator Dr. Thorndyke, John Dickson Carr, master of the 'locked room crime' and known for his gothic atmospheres and complex mysteries, S.S. Van Dine, creator of the elegant detective Philo Vance, the versatile A.E.W. Mason: versatile author, who with the character of Inspector Hanaud was one of the first detectives to combine cunning and humanity, Georgette Heyer, writer of detective stories that reflect her ability to create detailed settings and vivid characters.

Finally, there are Gladys Mitchell, creator of the unusual detective Mrs. Bradley, with her original and bizarre plots, H.C. Bailey, known for the character of the medical detective Reggie Fortune, Bailey and focused on detective stories with medical and psychological themes, adding a touch of humour, and Nicholas Blake, pseudonym of the poet Cecil Day-Lewis, creator of the detective Nigel Strangeways, known for his insight and literary sensibility

Towards the beginning of the 1940s, the cultural and social changes that followed the Second World War led to an evolution of the detective genre towards new, more modern styles of 'noir' and psychological detective stories and the decline of the Golden Age authors was inexorable. However, the legacy of detective fiction that characterised the Golden Age has remained influential with its clarity of logic, its balance of entertainment and intellect and its characters that continue to be celebrated and re-read to this day.

## 3. The Life and Work of Agatha Christie

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller, Lady Mallowan, known as Agatha Christie, was born in Torquay, Devonshire, England, on 15 September 1890. Agatha adored her childhood and remained deeply attached to her family home, Ashfield, which was the backdrop of her earliest dreams. Throughout her life, she continued to dream about the beloved house. Coming from a middle-class family, Agatha's mother, Clara Boehmer, believed that Agatha should not attend school and should wait until the age of eight to learn to read. By the time she was four, however, Agatha had already taught herself to read, and so, although she did not attend any school, she began to study at home with her mother, grandmother and governesses. With her father Frederick she learned mathematics, a subject she loved, and these lessons were the closest she ever came to receiving any formal education. As a child, Christie was an avid reader, she particularly loved books by Edith Nesbit, Lewis Carroll and Arthur Conan Doyle. Her father died in 1901 at the age of fifty-five, when she was eleven, leaving the family in difficult financial circumstances (Thompson 24).

From that point forward, and for the next twenty-five years until Clara's passing, Agatha became the central figure in her mother's world. While Clara also cherished her other children, Madge and Monty, Agatha held a unique place in her heart. It was Agatha's quiet emotional depth, vivid inner world, soulful and dreamy eyes, and unwavering faith in the love

she continually sought that made her so special to Clara; and so, it was that the bond between Clara and Agatha grew closer than ever before. (Thompson 31)

In 1905 Agatha Christie went to study in Paris and there she began to realise that the world of her youth was trapped within structures as rigid as the corsets she was forced to wear, as rigid as her upbringing of smiles and sips of tea. And it was precisely when she began to realise everything that she wrote her first romance, *Snow on the Desert* (1909) a novel centred on the sensual aspects of stories of love and sexual lives, stories far removed from the poems that had characterised her dreams, born of observation rather than imagination.

In 1910 she returned to London, where she discovered that her mother was ill, and so, driven by their precarious economic conditions and Clara's state of health, the two women decided to spend some time at the Gezirah Palace Hotel in Cairo, Egypt, a well-known and affordable destination for people of their social standing, where the climate was warmer and it was there that Agatha gathered inspiration for *Snow on the Desert*. Gradually, she was deepening her insight into human actions and motivations, noting their schematic nature and predictability. (Thompson 121)

Upon her return to England, Christie devoted herself to writing, with her first story being *The House of Beauty*, which she later published under the title *The House of Dreams*, and which was followed by other stories all marked by the writer's marked interest in spiritualism and the paranormal. Christie, who initially wrote under the pseudonym Monosyllaba, was never able to publish her early works, yet she continued to write non-stop. (Rzepka and Haley 416)

In 1913 she met an aviator from the *Royal Flying Corps*, Archibald (Archie) Christie. He was twenty-three years old (a year older than Agatha), he was tall, thin, intense, practical, polished, had a decisive manner, but he was also romantic and gallant. He had also faced hardships and was without money, but his ambition drove him to become a second lieutenant in the *Royal Field Artillery*. Then he invested his money in flying lessons on Salisbury Plain and, thanks to them, became Britain's 245th qualified aviator, joining the *Royal Flying Corps* at Exeter. And they first saw at a dance in Ugbrooke to which they were both invited; they began to date until Archie asked her to marry him and Agatha, although already engaged, accepted. However, the marriage was not finalized for two years, as it was repeatedly delayed and postponed due to Clara's disapproval. When the First World War broke out, Archie was sent to France to fight against the Germans, and Agatha Christie contributed by serving as a nurse within the *Voluntary Aid Detachment* at Torquay Hospital, not only caring for wounded

soldiers but also learning a great deal about poisons and medicines, an experience she considered to be among the most rewarding of her life and which came in very handy when, inspired by this knowledge, she decided to write detective stories. After the war, the writer and her husband settled in a suburb in north-west London. (Thompson 135)

In 1920, she published *The Mysterious Affair at Styles (Poirot at Styles Court)*, in which the character of the famous detective, Hercule Poirot, appears for the first time. He is presented as a former Belgian police officer who had fled to England after the Great War; in fact, the writer drew inspiration for this character from a real person, a Belgian refugee living in Torquay. The novel was quite successful, in the wake of the exploding interest in detective or crime novels, made popular by the Sherlock Holmes stories. In her second novel, *The Secret Adversary* (1922), she created the characters of Tuppence and Tommy Beresford, a detective pair who appeared in just four of her novels. (Rzepka and Haley 416)

In 1926, a marital crisis occurred with Archie, who had fallen in love with Nancy Neele, whom he had met a few years earlier during a promotional tour of the British Empire Mission, which took them to South Africa, Australia and New Zealand. After an argument, Archie left home to spend the weekend with his lover. (Autobiography 287)

Agatha Christie also went out, leaving a note for her secretary and informing her that she was heading for Yorkshire. Agatha did not return for eleven days, and her car was discovered at a chalk quarry in Newlands Corner. This disappearance caused a great stir and in addition to the police, many volunteers took part in the search. The writer was found in a hotel in Harrogate, under the name Teresa Neele (which was the surname of Archie's mistress) visiting from Cape Town (South Africa). The reason for this disappearance has always remained shrouded in mystery; the writer herself never mentioned this episode in her life, not even in her autobiography. It was probably due to a nervous breakdown, caused by the difficult time Agatha Christie was going through in her private life: the pain of her husband's betrayal and the recent death of her mother, to whom she was very close. In 1928, after her divorce, Christie travelled to Istanbul (Turkey) and Baghdad (Iraq) aboard the Orient Express train. During this trip, she met an archaeologist, Max Mallowan (fourteen years her junior), and they married in 1930. This second marriage was happier than the first and lasted a lifetime. Agatha also frequently joined her husband on his archaeological digs to Syria, Turkey and Iraq; all the places she visited were a great source of inspiration for her and provided the backdrop for her novels, in fact, many of her stories are set in these places. (Thompson 325)

In the 1930s, Christie published some of her best novels, such as *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), which marked the debut of Miss Marple, one of her own favourite detectives and a beloved character among her readers. Another notable work from this period was *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), which she wrote while she was in Istanbul. (Thompson 423)

During World War II, Christie gained significant knowledge of poisons while working in the pharmacy at *University College Hospital* in London, a skill she later utilized in her writing. Agatha Christie did not only write crime novels, but also seventeen plays, such as *Witness for the Prosecution* (1925) and *The Mousetrap*, which was performed in London in 1952, and is still performed in the theatre today, so much so that already in the 1970s it held the record for the most performed play in theatre history. (Rzepka and Haley 416)

In 1956, Christie was honoured as a *Commander of the Order of the British Empire* in recognition of her literary achievements, and in 1971 she was elevated to a *Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire*. She passed away at her country house in Wallingford, England, on 12 January 1976. (Thompson 505)

## 4. Social Context and Gender Roles in Interwar Britain

The inter-war period in Britain, despite being marked by a broad and vibrant cultural richness, has often been underestimated by literary scholars; in fact, unlike other historical periods, in which the combination of very different literary and cultural forms was hailed by scholars as a period of great cultural ferment, in this case the critics, conditioned by an excessively narrow approach typical of modernism of our times failed to take a comprehensive view of the culture as a whole and ended up disdaining the literary production of the interwar period, accusing it of being devoid of relevant cultural expressions and strongly marked by a strong contrast between high, elite culture and popular, mass culture. As a result, figures like Noel Coward and P.G. Wodehouse were considered less relevant than writers like Stephen Spender or Christopher Isherwood, while popular authors like Agatha Christie and Daphne du Maurier were almost completely ignored and deprived of artistic dignity. (Hoffman 18)

Indeed, this period was characterised by extraordinary changes and a lively expansion of feminist commitment in the cultural, artistic and, more specifically, literary fields; a new

world was born for women's writing, characterised by a very different type of literary research, which could recognise other audiences, other pleasures, and give intellectual credibility and dignity to certain works that had already been present in the past but had never appeared in the histories of literary criticism (Matthew 6). Those years saw the beginning of the cultural revolution in publishing, education, the arts and the media that became the distinctive and enduring achievement of the contemporary feminist movement. It was during this period that the literary work that attempted to find a way to anthropologise the middle classes, found a way to assert itself, creating the conditions to dignify middle-class culture as conceived by women and interpret it as a different and unknown culture rather than the unexamined norm. And so those women whom Virginia Woolf called 'the daughters of educated men', although singularly silent about the aetiology of their class perceptions, were, fortunately, less discrete and restrained in their novels (Woolf 15). The pursuit of a personal space that was simultaneously domestic and public, private and professional, highlights the profound significance that writing held for women, given their roles within the family and society. Women have been deeply engaged in domestic dynamics, often serving as the hidden protagonists of history, a role that defines the term 'bourgeois' when associated with the female gender. In the interwar period, this notion of 'other history' that was experienced from within, acquired a new meaning. The concept of private life and its associated meanings became a focal point of renewed artistic interest, finding expression in new literary forms. To explore this history, one must enter the most ordinary homes and seemingly less relevant lives: for example, Charlotte Mew's 1916 poem named *The Quiet House*, captures the breakdown of late Victorian idealism in its shifts between lyricism and the vernacular, as well as in the fierce reversal of romantic imagery conveyed by lines like *„a rose can stab you across the street"*. However, the world that is evoked as a source of tension in this instance is the more strictly domestic and familiar one, in which the speaker finds his place, and which includes familial ties, respect for the elderly, the idea of female sacrifice and of 'home sweet home'. She describes a form of violence as radical as that occurring on other fronts, destroying an outdated paradigm of bourgeois decorum. She feels that 'everything is burnt out, and not quite finished', much like many of her male contemporaries, who are also victims of the end of an era (Light 5). The greatest gaps in our understanding of life in 20th century Britain are often the result of the predominantly male perspective of its writers. According to Light, literary history of the 'inter-war years' has been told almost entirely from the male perspective (6). Whether we are talking about the right-wing aesthetes, the 1930s radical poets, declining English liberalism, modernism, or social realism, male authors have always

been regarded as the main representatives of the nation. This narrow view is common among both left-wing and right-wing critics: names such as Eliot, Forster, Joyce and Auden, or Lawrence and Orwell, dominate the narrative, while the reading habits of the general public, particularly women, are rarely mentioned (Light 6). Home, understood as a sense of cultural belonging, is often absent from the literary histories of the period, a void left by the influence of modernism, which celebrated marginality as an ideal condition (Mowat 16). For example, in his book *Abroad*, Paul Fussell explores examines how disillusioned British writers reject the concept of home and find solace only in foreign lands, far from a Britain they consider stifling and culturally dead. Fussell describes these writers as disenchanted people who, after the horrific experiences of war, see peace as a period devoid of manhood, marked by increasing egalitarianism and the domestication of national life. There is a sense of wounded male pride in these authors, who see domestic life and family activities as a symbol of weakness. Peace, for them, is associated with a castration of true masculinity. Writers such as Lawrence, Orwell, and Waugh express their disgust at what they perceive as the proletarianization and feminization of British life (Light 6-8). Their works reflect a nostalgia for a more heroic and virile era, in which war, not domestic life, represented the true essence of masculinity. Criticisms of elements of British culture, such as cooking, Sundays and even women, reveal a deep unease with a country that no longer seems fit for heroes (Doane 19).

Between 1920 and 1940, there is a significant transformation of sexual identities, signifying a broader process of redefinition of Englishness: the virtues of middle-class life, once relegated to the private sphere, acquire a renewed public and national importance. This shift marks a departure from the heroic and masculine discourse of national destiny, which was cherished by the Victorian and Edwardian middle classes, towards an Englishness that is less focused on imperialism and more introspective, private, domestic and, in certain aspects, aligned with ‘feminine’ qualities (Sally 35). In this context, there was a growing admiration for civic values and the simple joys of life: symbolized by the ‘little man’ (e.g., the suburban husband tending the garden) and by Britain’s image as a modest, athletic nation resisting the dictators (Colis & Dodd 86). This change reflected a new way of thinking about the national temperament, where true heroism was seen in the efforts of the ‘common people’ on their ‘home front’. While this transformation offered democratic possibilities by moving away from emulating the upper classes and rejecting imperial ideals, it also fostered a trend toward the increasing privatization of national life (Light 8). The inter-war middle class is frequently portrayed as embodying political and social conservatism, with a tendency towards isolationism and introspection, absorbed in what has been termed ‘the last look’ or ‘the long

weekend' preceding the war. This perception is further supported by the era's focus on domestic consumer culture, home ownership and the centrality of the nuclear family. However, this represents only one aspect of the story of those years; one must also consider how these decades fit into the ongoing process of modernisation. This issue becomes particularly crucial when we talk about the experience of women in that period. The history of women, experienced in a different context from that of men, does not necessarily follow the same path and can take connected but distinct directions. The inter-war period is often regarded as a historical interlude, a pause between more impactful events: however, this sombre portrayal, often influenced by battles such as those for suffrage, as a time of female despondency clashes with the sense of excitement and liberation that many women felt in the new cultural activities of the time. Evolving entertainment and sports cultures, including cinema, tennis clubs, and innovative financial options like hire purchase and affordable mortgages, provided women with new social and personal opportunities. Additionally, emerging domestic patterns, such as the employment of daily maids and the introduction of household appliances, transformed the dynamics of housework. Writing about women's freedom in this period also requires us to consider the shifting attitudes toward the female body, a theme that became particularly prominent in the post-war era: for instance, the introduction of disposable sanitary towels may have been as significant an event as the increase in female education or changes in the labour market. Even small details, such as the change from the elaborate hairstyle of 1890 to the more sober cut of 1935, represent a radical change (Light 10).

## 5.Male murderers

Rivers of ink have been spilled on Agatha Christie's male detectives, especially on her longest-lived detective, Poirot, who was present from 1920 with his first appearance in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* until the mid-1970s, when he concluded his career in *Elephants Can Remember* (1972) and in *Curtain* (1975). Over the years, he appeared in 33 novels and 65 short stories. Poirot is generally described as a parody of the traditional male hero, due to his distinctive traits such as eccentricity, narcissism and attention to domestic details, often interpreted as feminine or 'foreign' traits in contrast to English heroism, although he becomes more familiar and accepted over time as his personality adapts to the changes in post-war

culture (Rzepka and Horsley, 419). Much less interest has been devoted, however, to the figures of the male assassins: in this section, we would like to explore the more enigmatic and controversial aspects of two important characters in Christie's novels, Judge Wargrave from *And Then There Were None* and Dr. James Sheppard from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

### 5.1. Justice Wargrave in *And Then There Were None*

The first murderer to be considered in this examination of characters in Christie's novels is perhaps the most emblematic and fascinating, Judge Lawrence John Wargrave. In *And Then There Were None* he plays a dual role: the active role of the murderer and the rational role of 'moral guardian', i.e. the detective. While the novel incorporates many elements typical of the detective genre, it notably diverges by omitting the conventional central figure of a detective who unravels the mystery. The plot of the novel unfolds on Soldier Island, an isolated island off the English coast on which ten people are mysteriously invited, each with a dark past by their absentee landlords. Shortly after, a series of murders begins, following the pattern of the nursery rhyme 'Ten Little Soldiers', ending with the suicide of Vera Claythorne who, as she succumbs to guilt and overwhelming emotions, ends up hanging herself.

The mystery is only solved in the novel's epilogue, when a letter is found in a bottle in which Wargrave confesses to being the 'executioner' who orchestrated everything. And so it turns out that each of the guests actually committed a crime for which they went unpunished: the religious and uptight Emily Brent indirectly caused the suicide of a girl by refusing to help her, the former private detective William Blore with his false testimony convicted an innocent man, the young and wealthy Anthony Marston killed two children in a car accident without remorse, and so the others. Wargrave, knowing that he is terminally ill, decides to stage the 'perfect crime' and inflict justice on those who have escaped the law. He watches the other guests and, without revealing his identity, manipulates them and kills them in order of the severity of the crime they have committed, one after the other linking each murder to the nursery rhyme and staging his own murder, generating increasingly intense paranoia and tension among the guests. In the end it is those who committed the most serious crime, Vera Claythorne, a former housekeeper who let a child drown for personal gain, and Philip Lombard, an adventurer with few moral scruples, who is accused of letting a group of

indigenous men die to save himself. Vera kills Philip thinking he is the culprit but then she too succumbs by committing suicide.

In the letter, Wargrave confesses to everything, boasting that he had carried out the 'perfect crime' and says he was about to take his own life to ensure that no one would ever discover his involvement. Judge Lawrence is a retired judge, a man who has always lived in power and is used to inflicting sentences and punishments; with his cold and analytical mind he acts as a sharp director and orchestrator who judges and punishes the other guests, all of whom deserve to be punished for their faults because they are guilty according to the thinking dear to Christie. In many ways, Wargrave assumes the role of a detective, however, the revelation eventually exposes him as the mastermind behind the murders of everyone on Soldier Island. In his letter of confession, as if pervaded by a delirium of omnipotence, he describes in detail how he located and invited the uncaught murderers to inflict on them the, in his view, just punishment. He acted as a detective would have done, uncovering the truth about past deaths and unmasking the real culprits, all apparently innocent. Throughout the novel, it is Judge Wargrave who asks questions, inquiring about the details of their invitations to the island and, when the murders begin to occur, questioning them about their alibis and making suggestions as a detective trying to solve a case involving potentially lethal substances would do.

Under this pretext he increasingly assumes the power to subtly manipulate the other guests, ultimately leading to their deaths. In his final narration it is he himself who confirms this dual role when he states that "[f]rom an early age I knew very strongly the lust to kill. But side by side with this went a contradictory trait - a strong sense of justice. It is abhorrent to me that an innocent person or creature should suffer or die by any act of mine" (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 301-302). In this way, he reveals the two opposite sides of his personality, that of murderer and of executioner, determined to kill only those he deems deserving of it.

Christie cleverly inverts the normal structure of the detective novel, which in fact starts with an investigation and concludes with a successful murder, whereas the typical detective story follows the opposite sequence. The other anomaly is Wargrave's decision to o seize control of justice, opting to personally punish criminals by committing crimes that he considers just and necessary. But the combination of his sense of being a judge and his role as a detective imposes on him the punishment that he has considered just for all the other murderers in history and which he therefore also inflicts on himself. On the other hand, as Curran (245) states, Christie's works consistently portray murder as a crime that must be

punished: Christie solves in this way, with her characteristic ingenuity, the dilemma between legal justice and moral justice that is also found in later novels such as *Ordeal by Innocence*, with the character of Jacko who dies while wrongfully imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. The balance between natural and legal justice is, in this case, restored when it is discovered that Jacko is morally responsible for the murder he committed, despite not being the one who delivered the fatal blow. (245).

Wargrave embodies a judge with a stark, dichotomous sense of morality, for whom it is not possible even himself not to be punished for crimes committed for making himself a judge. Wargrave's role as authoritarian judge and executioner exemplifies perhaps better than any other character in Christie's novels the concepts of power, authority, and control. In his behaviour we see a clear declination of the aspects inherent in the concept of power according to the thought of such important authors as Michel Foucault (1926-84), who for his original and articulate psycho-social theories can be considered one of the great thinkers of the 20th century (Dumm 45). Michel Foucault's theory of power has raised the interest of psychologists and sociologists who are engaged in trying to understand and explain the social consequences and implications arising from it; this is mainly due to the fact that Foucault's sociology of power, and its connection to law, lacks a coherent or unified explanation. In fact, Foucault throughout his activity as a thinker, instead of fully and cohesively describing all his theories in a large programmatic work, preferred to write a series of iconoclastic works that suggested countless possible lines of development of his thought (Bevir 346).

It is appropriate, therefore, to try to fully develop the Foucauldian vision to understand how it translates into Wargrave's behaviour. Power, according to Foucault should be seen as a "multiplicity of relations of force" (*The History of Sexuality* 92), each of which "acquires normative force in proportion to its ability to persuade, incite, influence, direct, repress or control the conduct of the other": hence the essence of another very important concept in Foucault's thought, normativity (93). In this meaning, however, the word "force," although it need not mean physical force, certainly includes within itself a coercive meaning (Bevir 345). The "force relationship" essentially manifests itself, in a society, as a relationship between two or more individuals who have the capacity to exert actions on each other: this can take place in a multiplicity of ways, and can involve a chain of reactions and counter-reactions (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality* 94) that involve the individuals themselves turning "into strategies without strategists and power is the name given to this complex strategic situation in a particular society" (92).

In Wargrave's actions, consistent with the concept of power relations introduced above, power is evident as a series of actions that shape and influence the behaviour of others. As Foucault suggests, "power exists only when it is enacted" (*Disciplining and Punishing: The Birth of the Prison* 194). Nevertheless, the action does not involve application of force. Whereas violence typically involves causing harm or destruction to a person or object, exerting power entails utilizing a more indirect and rational approach to influence others (Dore 341). As reported in the novel itself, speaking of Wargrave: "There was no doubt now who was in charge of the situation. This morning Wargrave had sat huddled in his chair on the terrace refraining from any overt activity. Now he assumed command with the ease born of a long habit of authority. He definitely presided over the court." (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 161)

But in Wargrave, next to the concept of power is also very strong there is another one extensively treated by Foucault, that of "normativity," a concept that is pervasive in both and legal law and political authority due to their "normative force." For Foucault, power is not something that can be possessed as modernism claims but is something that "is primarily relational" and, despite this, "never loses its normative character as defined above" (Schuld 20). In his approach Foucault shows that all power, including legal power, whether viewed in terms of "normativity" or "force," does not always have a negative meaning, but can also be productive (Dore 341). In fact, "the relational/normative view of power also shows that power can be productive, in contrast to the conventional approach that gives power a negative connotation in the sense that it excludes, represses, censors, etc." (Merquior 149). Thus, truth and reality, but also justice and equity are the products of power's productive aspect.

Wargrave's position stems from the assumption that he wants to be positive: he wants justice to be done for the truth, since legal justice has been unable to bring it out, and with this motivation he arrogates to himself the power to control the lives and deaths of others, thus extending the physical limits of the courtrooms in which he has worked as a judge to the confines of Soldier Island. And it is precisely this need for control that makes Wargrave's role ambivalent: positive motivation as a judge replacing institutional power generates the negative aspect of power that Foucault expresses within *Discipline and Punish*. The Foucauldian view of institutional power always gives "rise to asymmetrical and nonegalitarian relations" since a normative relationship always an attempt to regulate or influence another person's behaviour, and this invariably results in "a multiplicity of points of resistance" (Foucault, *The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom* 11) on the part of those one attempts to subjugate. Wargrave, by substituting himself for institutional power,

inherits its characteristics and modes of application. His need for "domination" generates a unilateral power relationship, which enables him, as the agent element, to exercise his authority effectively, he must act with reasonable confidence to guide and control the actions the elements over whom he wishes to act, without encountering resistance. Judge Wargrave is thus in a position of domination over the other characters on the island, a domination that he exercises in the unawareness of those who are dominated, who are maneuvered like puppets without being able to resist, placing himself against them as the holder of disciplinary power.

The condition or state of domination is characterized "by the situation in which the relations of power, instead of being variable and allowing different partners a strategy which alters them, find themselves firmly set and congealed" (Foucault, *The Ethic of Care for the Self as a Practice of Freedom* 3). Wargrave recalls, in his behaviour Foucault's concept of surveillance by replicating Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon scheme to exert control continuously and effectively over the conduct of other guests on the island. (Dreyfus & Rabinow 188). In fact, Bentham's Panopticon, originated by the modern state as a disciplinary technology, served as a means of exercising dominion over its citizens: it was initially conceived as a means of control and surveillance within the prison, but its scheme easily lends itself to being applicable to other facilities and institutions where surveillance is paramount, such as asylums, schools, hospitals and factories. In Bentham's original idea, each cell has two windows in diametrically opposite positions from which, in addition to light entering, prisoners can be watched by observers positioned in a tower in the centre of the ring. From this tower one can see everything that is happening in each individual cell so that each individual prisoner is "completely individualized and constantly visible" at all times without him being aware of it (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 201-2).

In other words, the idea is that prisoners, knowing that surveillance is constant, not knowing when they are actually being observed, are inhibited from engaging in misbehaviour. This system of surveillance is based on absolute visibility, and more specifically on the prohibitive nature that the social gaze exerts; in the novel *And Then There Were None*, Christie achieves a closed-circle mystery in which the enormous power of the social gaze that Foucault describes is found. The characters, who are effectively prisoners because they are unable to leave the island on which they are confined, form a social circle, a circle that is not concretely physical (although, it can be assumed to be represented by the table around which the characters sit in a circle when they gather in the common room), reflecting the physical arrangement of the Panopticon, and in the central tower is he, Wargrave who observes without really being seen as an overseer, and in this way draws all the elements and combines

all the events so that his plan of retribution comes to fruition. The Panopticon of which Wargrave is the overseer is almost the forerunner of today's hidden surveillance camera, a ubiquitous observation tool that is positioned strategically and acts as a guard to allow constant surveillance of each patron without the patron realising he or she is being watched (Dreyfus & Rabinow 188). Unaware of when he is being watched, the prisoner is compelled to act as though he is under continuous surveillance in the same way as the characters in the novel know that they are constantly being observed by the mysterious murderer, who is none other than Wargrave acting as a guard. Nonetheless, this system does not only regulate the inmate: the guards are also a crucial component of the surveillance mechanism, since they must observe and fulfil ancillary responsibilities depending on their observations, and are obliged to keep an ironclad behavioural regime (Dreyfus & Rabinow 188); the particularity here is that Wargrave is simultaneously both prisoner and guard, and successfully juggling these two roles without concretely arousing suspicion among the other prisoners only fuels his delusion of omnipotence. Wargrave even arrogates to himself the power to decide on the life and death of the other characters by methodically planning the punishment to which they are to be subjected and the execution of their murders. Thus, the subject of power abuse slipping into a state of dominance returns again as a situation where the opposition of "prisoners" to power is successfully neutralised and power dynamics become unidirectional and intentional, that is, a situation is created where "stable mechanisms replace the free play of antagonistic reactions" (Foucault, *The Subject and Power* 225).

The position of dominance assumed by Wargrave as a judge represents hegemonic masculinity defined by Connell "as the configuration of gendered practice that embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is assumed to guarantee) the dominance of men and the subordination of women" (*Masculinities* 77). Hegemonic masculinity, as Connell explains, reflects a culturally recognized ideal of masculinity, but "this is not to say that the most visible bearers of hegemonic masculinity are always the most powerful people. They can be exemplars, like film actors, or even fictional figures, like film characters" (*Masculinities* 77). In fiction, these ideals are often embodied by heroic figures, a role Wargrave aspires to, that of the hero-justifier.

In an era in which fictional detectives are represented as heroes and so reflect hegemonic masculinity, Wargrave looks to the model of the detective novel as the model to be inspired by in order to become a concrete representation of hegemonic masculinity. He then becomes a detective, he assigns himself this role because the character of the detective

within the story is positioned as the hero. But at the same time, his conflicted nature between being detective and judge also compels him to embody the role of the murderer. This duality reflects his need to act as a vigilante, purging society of those he deems unworthy, embodying the tacit violence and aggression characteristic of hegemonic masculinity. Thus, the interplay of these roles signifies a convergence of distinct expressions of hegemonic masculinity, allowing Wargrave to establish a position of dominance over both male and female characters. Within the structural conventions of the detective genre, he thus realizes an idealized hegemonic male aspiration of omnipotence confirmed and witnessed by his ability to imprison on the island/Panopticon and punish all the murderers not imprisoned nor punished by the course of legal justice by killing them or inducing them to death, thus simultaneously playing the part of the detective's "moral guardian". He believes that his role as the hegemonic male dominating over the other characters whose guilt has made them subordinates 'justifies' his crime. Wargrave asserts complete authority over the events on the island, ensuring that none of his victims evade his meticulously planned retribution. The inability of the police to solve the enigmatic mystery of the murders Wargrave receives as a confirmation of his role and gratification for his actions. By eluding legal accountability and executing 'the perfect crime', Wargrave ultimately realizes the culmination of his delirium of omnipotence, a delirium which then finds confirmation and reward in the final confession, which is the only way for the police to learn how the facts, which otherwise would have remained unexplained, really unfolded. And the last act through which he is able to give expression to the hegemonic masculinity he embodies is that of being the only one worthy of being his own executioner; and so, he decides to evade the legal justice that has repeatedly failed and takes his own life.

From the perspective of masculinity representation, Wargrave's confession is the most important tool he consciously uses to express it and make it public for all to see. In this confession, Wargrave describes in detail his own motives and the methods he used to commit the murders depicted throughout the novel, it is in the letter that he explains how he manages to construct his own masculinity as hegemonic, consciously portraying himself in the eyes of the reader as the kind of man he wants to be and thinks the reader wants to see.

The letter begins with the statement: "I have, to begin with, an incurably romantic imagination. The practice of throwing a bottle into the sea with an important document inside was one that never failed to thrill me when reading adventure stories as a child" (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 301). In this way, Wargrave shows that he has absorbed his model of masculinity from imperial literature, reverting to outdated models of a masculinity of other

times, models that are now obsolete in modern Britain. Moreover, Wargrave asserts that his conflicting traits, such as "the lust for killing" (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 301) and "a strong sense of justice" (302), have persisted since childhood, reflecting a sense of "boyishness", an element confirmed by the fact that he based his killings on a nursery rhyme, as if it were a figment of a child's imagination. His upbringing and the education he received as a child motivate his desire to capture and punish uncaught killers, and in this his figure seems to recall those qualities and concepts that Deane identifies as "boyishness" (85) an element that he identifies as fundamental to the expression of masculinity in pre-war British Popular Literature. Moreover, Wargrave's perception of hegemonic masculinity is also the result of the environment in which he grew up, matured and worked, that of the institutions of power and the legal system of which he has always been a part.

Power and hegemony are not only expressed through violence but, as Connell (107) states, also through the mechanisms and invisible functioning of institutions. Wargrave's existence is closely linked to institutions dominated by men, especially those associated with authority and violence, such as the judicial system. His position as a judge not only places him at the heart of criminal justice but also ties him to the various manifestations of violence that accompany it. His pursuit of justice and desire to exercise power over his fellow men stem from a privileged social position that has accompanied him throughout his life. His actions are an expression of the potential for corruption and cruelty that characterises traditional power structures and is reflected in traditional male roles of domination and control. As the mercenary Philip Lombard says:

> …I'd plump for Wargrave!'… he's an old man and he's been presiding over courts of law for years. That is to say, he's played God Almighty for a good many months every year. That must go to a man's head eventually. He gets to see himself as all powerful, as holding the power of life and death – and it's possible that his brain might snap and he might want to go one step farther and be Executioner and Judge Extraordinary. (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 181)

However, Wargrave's pleasure and lust for power in the administration of justice can be seen as a perversion of judicial power that challenges the idea that authority should be just and equitable. Wargrave's meticulous observation and manipulation of other characters reflects Foucault's concept of surveillance. His rationality, control and assertive nature conform to traditional male ideals of leadership and domination, domination that is defined

because there is a relationship of subordination that all other characters, particularly female characters, assume towards him.

Indeed, Wargrave reflects the prototypical hegemonic masculinity that characterises all of Agatha Christie's work, a masculinity that is idealised and pursued by many other male characters, and a masculinity that is marked by qualities like activity, rationality, heterosexuality, and a restraint from excessive violence. The characters who embody the hemogenic masculinity of Christie's novels are not depicted as possessing traditionally ideal masculine traits, e.g. they are never particularly physically endowed with strength or physical prowess, they exhibit violent behaviour only occasionally, unless they are murderers, in which case they transgress the boundaries of acceptable behaviour.

So, Judge Wargrave is now a pensioner, he does not kill with violence or force, he resorts to poison, he drops weights from above, he induces suicide, only when forced does he push himself to more violent acts, such as when he pushes Dr Edward George Armstrong into the sea, who was the only one who knew he was still alive, an accomplice to his staged murder.

But his ability to control the narrative and the actions of others aligns with the traditional traits with which Connell's idea of the dominance of hegemonic masculinity over subordinate masculinities and femininities finds concrete application in Christie's novels. And in contrast, the rest of the novel's cast of characters, all of whom are uncaught murderers, "represent aspects of masculinity and femininity that are wrong or flawed" (Warren 52). The other male characters deviate from the hegemonic ideal by lacking either rationality, activity, or heterosexuality; in Christie's conception, they are characters who lost their status as embodiments of hegemonic masculinity upon committing murder. Furthermore, Vera Claythorne is constructed as the weak and objectified feminine, serving as a contrasting figure to Wargrave's active and rational masculinity throughout the novel; whereas Vera commits murder for selfish motives, Wargrave justifies his killings as means to serve the 'greater good' of justice. In the scene where Vera takes her own life, she simultaneously becomes the subject of Wargrave's impersonal psychological experiment aimed at confirming his theories about the female psyche and the object of his unrelenting gaze:

> From my window I saw Vera Claythorne shoot Lombard. A daring and resourceful young woman. I always thought she was a match for him and more. As soon as that had happened I set the stage in her bedroom. It was an interesting psychological experiment. Would the consciousness of her own guilt, the state of nervous tension consequent on having just shot a man, be sufficient, together with the hypnotic suggestion of the surroundings, to

cause her to take her own life? I thought it would. I was right. Vera Claythorne hanged herself before my eyes where I stood in the shadow of the wardrobe. (Christie, *And Then There Were None* 314)

### 5.2. Dr. James Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*

In introducing the character of Dr. James Sheppard, one cannot fail to mention the debate around the codes of mystery novels that has arisen around the novel in which he appears in the triple role of murderer, narrator, and assistant to Detective Poirot; in the English village of King's Abbot, the wealthiest and most distinguished citizen, Roger Ackroyd, is killed in his own study with a Tunisian dagger. Poirot, now retired from his profession to grow pumpkins, is assigned to investigate the case by a relative of the victim.

The narrative opens with the death of Mrs. Ferrars, a wealthy widow surrounded by rumours of her involvement in her husband's alleged murder. Although her death is first interpreted as a suicide, events take an unexpected turn when Roger Ackroyd, her widowed suitor, is suddenly killed. Among the main suspects are Roger's sister-in-law, Mrs. Cecil Ackroyd, burdened by large debts due to her extravagant spending; then her daughter Flora and her fiancé Ralph Paton, Ackroyd's stepson, also deep in debt and about to inherit his stepfather's fortune; Geoffrey Raymond, Ackroyd's personal secretary; Parker, a mellifluous servant; Major Blunt, a hunter; and Ursula Bourne, a maid who resigned from her job on the same day as the murder. Poirot, newly arrived in the village, starts investigating at Flora's request, and several clues seem to prove the guilt of Ralph, who is the prime suspect at first. The novel is written in the first person, diacritically, by the narrator, Dr. James Sheppard, an educated and astute town doctor who becomes Poirot's own assistant. As Sheppard himself says: "As I say, up till the Monday evening, my narrative might have been that of Poirot himself. I played Watson to his Sherlock". (Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 116) He is the culprit in the murder: he blackmailed Mrs. Ferrars, having discovered that she had really killed her husband, and murdered Ackroyd to prevent the latter from discovering the extortion. He had then mechanically modified Ackroyd's Dictaphone so that it would, at a given time, play the victim's voice and thus guarantee him an ironclad alibi. He had then returned to the mansion to retrieve the Dictaphone by taking advantage of a phone call, engineered by himself, and had also created evidence to incriminate Ralph by leaving muddy footprints on the windowsill of the study with his shoes. In the finale, the truth emerges with a

twist: the account with which the doctor intended to describe Poirot's failure to find the real murderer turns instead into his confession that ends with him planning his suicide.

*The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is perhaps the crime novel in which Christie is best able to display her ability to make her stories fascinating by challenging readers and subverting their assumptions/expectations (Tyagi 196). This novel is proof that in Christie's fiction, apart from the detective, no one can be trusted, not even the Watson-like narrator, and that every character is capable of being either a murderer or a victim. Moreover, the violence at the heart of the novel is consistently abrupt and unanticipated, emerging within settings that appear to be the epitome of comfort and security, such as the intimate sphere of family life. Dr. Sheppard, a close associate of the victim, is introduced in the narrative as a seemingly reliable individual, characterized by his practical nature and apparent trustworthiness. (Todorov 43). Christie has him quote Kipling on the very opening page, thus setting a tone that is cultured, orderly, and trustworthy. His gestures, his statements denote character marked by integrity and intellect and for example his dismay at his sister Caroline's trivial gossip portrays him as a person of uprightness and seriousness (Tyagi 200).

As a result, Christie faced criticism from readers, admirers, and prominent publications like the *News Chronicle*, as well as from some of her contemporaries in the crime fiction genre, who argued that she had deviated from established conventions and failed to adhere to the rules of the genre (Tyagi 197). Christie betrays the reader's trust in the conventions of detective fiction by selecting Sheppard as the murderer, as the assistant to the detective is traditionally excluded from being the perpetrator. By accepting Dr. Sheppard as the Watson figure of Poirot, it is as if his readers are being led down "the path of self-deception by encouraging them to make assumptions instead of being alert to all possibilities" (Todorov 45).

Agatha Christie was initially indifferent to these accusations but later pleaded her case saying: "a lot of people say that *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is cheating; but if they read it carefully, they will see that they are wrong. Such little lapses of time as there have to be are merely concealed in an ambiguous sentence…the narrative contains nothing but the truth though not the whole truth." (*Autobiography* 352-353)

So, there is no deception on Christie's part; she adheres to the conventions of detective fiction. The ambiguity of Sheppard's account of the events in Ackroyd's study during the murder is intentional, solely revealed towards the novel's ending. When he claims to have done what little there was to be done, as he leaves Roger Ackroyd's study, it should practically constitute proof of guilt for attentive readers. Sheppard is the first to find Roger

Ackroyd's dead body and is left alone with it for a sufficient period to carry out the minimal action required, which is, in fact, the removal of the Dictaphone, an important clue that readers tend to overlook. A second, thorough reading allows one to uncover the underlying ambiguity hidden within the narrative, demonstrating the narrator's craftsmanship. Christie, true to her method, does not hide any facts from the reader that are known to Poirot but carefully withholds crucial details from the reader until the novel's conclusion. In the novel, the secret is cleverly and skilfully handled, but a closer examination exposes Sheppard's motivations, which appear more as a flaw or vulnerability than as outright malevolence. His actions are driven by greed and a lack of moral clarity, leading him to engage in blackmail with Mrs. Ferrars, resulting in her suicide, and ultimately prompting the murder of Roger Ackroyd to cover his tracks. But, Caroline, Sheppard's sister, through her keen intuition, discerns a lack of morals in her brother. Poirot also recognizes Sheppard's moral weakness, understanding that he is vulnerable to greed and easily swayed by temptation. As he points out at the beginning of the text, everyone involved had something to hide, and this should also apply to Dr Sheppard, but readers almost forget to consider him because of their trust in the narrator.

The name Sheppard is used to evoke precise pastoral echoes, and the choice that the murderer is a doctor undermines the common bourgeois belief that that individuals in such esteemed professions are trustworthy and morally upright. However, in the novel, Sheppard exploits his medical knowledge to blackmail a vulnerable woman and does not hesitate to betray the trust the Ackroyds place in him, both professionally and personally, to perpetrate a calculated murder. Sheppard's extreme betrayal of friendship/trust by both Ackroyd and Ralph upsets the traditional conventions of the detective novel. This suggests that, within the genre, evil is not confined to overtly suspicious characters but can also manifest in those who appear to be the most dependable and trustworthy. (Heizmann and Olsson 757)

Sheppard's character leads one to reflect on two other themes that are strongly present in Christie's narrative production, but which particularly connote his threefold role within the novel: the relationship between power and truth and power and knowledge. In both themes the echoes of Foucault's thought, which has already been a strong inspiration for the character of Judge Wargrave, as has been detailed in the previous section, come back strongly.

The first of the two themes addressed concerns more specifically the problem of analysing the link between "truth" and "power"; in this novel it is as if the concept of truth understood as absolute reality is refuted in order to take up what Foucault argued in what could "be called a pragmatist/relativist theory of truth" (Mahon 2-3) for which truth is

something relative, changeable and represents nothing more than another technological tool of power (Mahon 5). In this relativist view, rights, duties and justice arise only from particular power relations among individuals and are the result of circumstances that arise in particular historical contexts (Mahon 5). Thus, truth is ultimately connected with power relations. (Foucault, *The Order of Things* 298).

This dynamic characterizes and distinguishes everything described in Christie's novel: Dr. Sheppard alters states, objects and events by creating his own truth, a truth generated by his power as director of history. And in this way, he constructs an alibi for himself by mechanically altering Ackroyd's Dictaphone so that it, at a given time, plays the victim's voice, making everyone believe he is still alive while he has already been murdered; in the same way he creates evidence of guilt for Ralph by leaving muddy footprints on the windowsill of the study with his shoes. He designs and implements a plan to retrieve the Dictaphone by returning to the mansion through the phone call he designed. Sheppard creates the appearance of a death that occurred at a time when he was not present, and this becomes the truth for all the other characters and for the reader himself until his plan emerges. And in the construction of this truth, he uses what he possesses and gives him power: knowledge.

Hence the second concept of a Foucauldian nature that characterizes the novel, the use of knowledge as an instrument of power. Sheppard uses his medical and practical knowledge to deceive and commit murder; he exploits his role as a doctor, and the authority that such a role gives him, to commit and conceal a crime, thereby mystifying the belief that doctors are inherently trustworthy and ethically blameless. Thus, he subverts the expectations his figure generates: he uses his knowledge to manipulate those around him by exploiting that link between power and knowledge that Foucault highlights. Indeed, the relational perspective, under which Foucault argues that power must be interpreted, suggests that power and knowledge should not be viewed as separate entities but as fundamentally interconnected, forming a unified power/knowledge construct. (Heizmann and Olsson 757).

Starting from the perspective that "the subjugation of bodies through the control of ideas" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 102), knowledge, when wielded by individuals like Sheppard, becomes "a discursive system of coercion and control", which leads to his domination (Tyagi 200). In his delirium of power Sheppard, as the manipulator of reality and other characters, also applies the strategies of control and surveillance based on the Foucauldian concept of the Panopticon: in this case the prison takes on the physical connotations of the small town of King's Abbot, with Sheppard who, with the power conferred on him by his role as trusted doctor/assistant/narrator, monitors, controls,

manipulates and shapes the reader's and other characters' understanding of events, observing from his position as jailer, the movements and actions of all prisoners and controlling the unfolding of events.: "One advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you." (Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 97)

But his role is different from Wargrave's: Sheppard's position does not have the positive connotations that move the judge. It is clear from the reality at the novel's conclusion that Sheppard does not act for just or honourable ends, he is not a vigilante like Wargrave, and his prisoners are not murderers who deserve to be punished:

"-Dr. Sheppard has been very loyal," said Ralph. "He has stood by me through thick and thin. He did what he thought was best. I see now, from what M. Poirot has told me, that it was not really the best…

"Dr. Sheppard has been a model of discretion," said Poirot drily. "But me, I discover all the little secrets. It is my business." (197-198)

His Panopticon is actually just a tool that conveys Sheppard's power/knowledge to enable him to exercise his hegemonic position of dominance: we fall into a kind of borderline between surveillance and deception, in which the truth on which the system rests is a relative truth, it is the truth that Sheppard describes and narrates, it is his truth on the basis of which he makes his prisoners behave: "Not that I take any responsibility for Mrs. Ferrars's death. It was the direct consequence of her own actions. I feel no pity for her. I have no pity for myself either". (211)

Sheppard, too, can be seen as the embodiment of Connell's hegemonic masculine authority: hegemonic masculinity is constructed as rational in the figure of Sheppard, an educated man, a man of science, in contrast to the emotions and irrationality that characterizes female characters such as Flora, who is completely subjugated by her trust in him as a doctor, or Mrs. Ferrars, who is blackmailed by him and even induced to take her own life (Connel, *Masculinities* 164).

As Sheppard says: "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, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 9)

And more*:* "Come, now," I protested mildly, "you surely can't suggest that a young girl like Flora Ackroyd is capable of stabbing her uncle in cold blood?" (135)

The thoughts he expresses about women, commenting as narrator on their gestures, reactions and attitudes, always imply their inferiority to him: for him, women are weak, too simple to be able to deceive, as in the case of Mrs Ackroyd:

> One advantage of being a medical practitioner is that you can usually tell when people are lying to you. I should have known from Mrs. Folliott's manner, if from nothing else, that she did mind answering my questions— minded intensely. She was thoroughly uncomfortable and upset, and there was plainly some mystery in the background. I judged her to be a woman quite unused to deception of any kind, and consequently rendered acutely uneasy when forced to practise it. A child could have seen through her. (Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* 97)

When he acknowledges women's gifts, he immediately downplays them, claiming that their use of them is for futile and stupid purposes: an example is the various comments he makes about his sister Caroline to whom he also acknowledges gifts of cunning and deductive skills, gifts that are however completely overshadowed by her inability to mind her own business and her constant gossiping: "Really, Caroline is amazing. She never rests until she knows the last details of everybody's family secrets. Unfortunately, I have never been able to instil into her the decency of keeping them to herself." (158)

Or yet: "You seem to have invented a romantic fairy story of your own," I said. "You read too many trashy novels, Caroline. I've always told you so." (100)

Sheppard's role as a doctor aligns with hegemonic masculinity through rationality, control over medical knowledge and, above all, his professional authority, an authority that gives him but also exposes him to corruption and abuse. He thus ends up using his authority to commit murder and mystify clues and evidence. He is on a different plane from Walgrave, he does not embody any hero, he does not act out of any aspiration for justice, he kills for personal gain thus defying the ethical expectations of hegemonic masculinity itself.

For Sheppard, outward conformity to the hegemonic expectations of male-dominated society serves as an effective cover for his dark side, his criminal actions, he uses his rationality and his position of hegemony to create a deceptive reality and legitimise it.

Also returning in his figure, albeit reinterpreted and contextualised, is that power-corruption dualism that characterised the figure of Wargrave and that, more generally, characterises hegemonic masculinity within traditional male roles (Tyagi 196).

# 6.Female murderers

As with male murderers, female murderers have also been given much less attention by literary analysis and criticism than detective figures such as Miss Marple. In this section, the thesis investigates some of the more interesting aspects of the concept of female criminality as understood by Agatha Christie through two important characters from her very different novels, the actress Jane Wilkinson from *Lord Edgware Dies* and Bella Tanios from the novel *Dumb Witness*.

## 6.2. Jane Wilkinson in *Lord Edgware Dies*

Jane Wilkinson, or rather Lady Edgware, is a complex and enigmatic character whose readability is complicated by remaining artificial and lacking a knowable essence even after being identified as 'the murderess'.

*Lord Edgware Dies* is one of nine Christie novels after 1930 in which the narrator Hastings, Poirot's right-hand man, resembles Watson: thus, in it, the plot and characters are necessarily described subjectively. This lack of objectivity is emphasised as soon as the character of Lady Edgware, known by her stage name, Jane Wilkinson, is introduced into the novel through Hastings' emotional reaction to seeing the impersonation of her by another impersonator performer Carlotta Adams. From the very first pages, the themes of performance and ritual are important to the plot and the entire rest of the novel revolves around these themes: Christie 'got the idea' when she saw impressionist Ruth Draper perform on stage, and eventually based the character of Carlotta Adams on Draper (*Autobiography* 443).

Jane is a woman, she is beautiful, she is an actress, she is ambitious, and, above all, she is intelligent, and so she is able to exploit her talents to achieve her goals: she creates for herself a gender identity as close as possible to what society would expect for her and convinces everyone that she is what they believe her to be. She thus ends up manipulating situations, things, people and events in the context in which she operates, thus defying the traditional expectation of her contemporary era that sees the female gender as passive, submissive and assertive towards the male gender. A sort of duality is created for Jane between her public persona, a charming but stupid actress, and her private persona, an ambitious, cunning but also cynical and ruthless young woman. In this duality, broader themes

related to gender identity and society's expectations seem to be reflected, themes very dear to Christie, which, with this meaning, can be read and interpreted within a diatribe on gender identity and the stereotypes that accompany it, within which Judith Butler's theories of the performative gender can be placed.

Many authors argue that what is commonly attributed to a specific gender today differs profoundly from what was common for that gender in the past, a few decades or a few hundred years ago. A simple example: the colour pink that is now seen as a feminine colour was not so a hundred years ago. Thus, gender norms are not static, they are changing dynamically, and today faster than in the past. But what is meant by the terms gender and performativity? How are these two concepts interpreted and handled by Agatha Christie in her novels? In literature the word gender is used to refer to different concepts: sometimes it refers to acts performed by individuals, while at other times the word gender is used interchangeably with sex.

We usually grow up with the idea that a person's gender is determined by his or her sex and that this is something stable and traceable to a binary classification. In the common imagination gender and sex, however, express two different notions: as asserted by psychologist Robert Stoller, the word gender is used to describe how much feminine and masculine an individual exhibits in his or her behaviour while the word sex describes a person's biological characteristics.

This distinction argues that gender is not as stable as sex and that gender is socially constructed (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 9): gender roles, the differences between genders are the result of social interventions that condition people to behave in ways that meet the expectations that society has for the gender to which membership is attributed. Butler asserts that gender "is real only insofar as it is represented" (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution* 527) and that gender identity is formed through a set of acts: therefore, no one can be identified in a gender before performing gender acts, "identity is secured through the stabilizing concepts of sex, gender, and sexuality" (23), concepts that are expressions of gender performativity. It is as if each individual, by performing gender acts, begins to construct his or her own gender identity, an identity that ends up enclosing him or her as a shell and determining his or her performance.

Jane Wilkinson is the prototype par excellence of the performative gender of Butler's theories: she is a woman and a public figure. Jane is aware of this and exploits it to her advantage: she thus constructs for herself an identity constructed through gender acts

purposely designed according to the norms that society provides in the context in which she lives only for the purpose of achieving her goals.

Jane Wilkinson is the archetypal young and beautiful, but stupid woman, used to being the centre of attention and having everything she wants. Poirot himself, referring to her, says: "So that is Lady Edgware? Yes, I remember-I have seen her act. She is *belle femme*." (Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* 9), and also comments that "The play must be written about her and for her. She appears to me of the type of women who are interested only in themselves." (9)

Jane is described as "beautiful" (7), "a very interesting character" (18), "her voice was soft, low and deliciously seductive" (17), she is one of those women who "see only their own forward path" (10), "taboos have no meaning for her [...] Just sees one thing only in life-what Jane wants" (17); the Butlerian performance society expects of her is that of a frivolous, self-centred, narcissistic woman who is nothing more than fashionable clothes, flowing blond hair and a charming voice. Jane is a professionally and socially elitist woman; whenever she appears, she is described in terms of what she wears and how she wears it. Jane's 'strong physical beauty' is described as something she wears with her clothes, an adornment that defines and represents her, with which she can 'play' and which allows her to wield power: "One will stand a good deal from a beautiful woman, my friend," said Poirot with a twinkle. "If she had the pug nose, the sallow skin, the greasy hair, then—ah! then she would not 'get away with it' as you put it." (27)

It is emblematic that the only physical description of Jane in the entire novel is only at the beginning and before she is even introduced. Moreover, it occurs when Hastings does not describe her directly, but rather the 'imitation' of her that Carlotta does, described instead as a 'talented young American actress': "The restrained gestures, each strangely significant, the slightly swaying body, the impression even, of strong physical beauty-how she did it, I cannot think [...] It was a little uncanny to hear that well-known, slightly husky voice with the fatalistic drop in it that had stirred me so often". (8)

Christie, in describing Jane through Carlotta's 'imitation' for the first time, clearly expresses her intention to describe her character as that of a beautiful and bewitching but perfectly imitable woman, a copy of a thousand other women of that type: and in fact, in the sequel, she never physically Jane again, apart from the clothes she wears and the way she smiles (Bernthal 139). The physical description of an imitation acts as an introduction to the physical Jane; it is as if from the outset, therefore, Jane's character and body are intrinsically linked to the performance, one with the performance itself.

The image of Jane's femininity is realised in the superficiality of this performance portrayed by Carlotta in her stage imitation because in real life that is the image society has of her, that is what society expects of her, and that is what defines her identity. Poirot explains: "There's the golden hair, the well-known hoarse voice and the mannerisms." (185). Jane on stage, as well as on screen, as well as at a dinner party in real life, is defined by those external 'tricks' that create her 'charming' body what Poirot calls "her individuality" (185), always, regardless of where she is or who she is in the company of.

And so, Jane to everyone is the one who would be able to kill Lord Edgware to marry the Anglo-Catholic Duke of Merton who has a better title and more money; too bad she is deemed too stupid to do so: "she'd kill somebody quite cheerfully-and feel injured if they caught her and wanted to hang her for it. The trouble is that she would be caught. She hasn't any brains. Her idea of a murder would be to drive up in a taxi, sail in under her own name and shoot." (17) Marriage becomes nothing more than a strategic move within Jane's ambitious journey to elevate her social status and achieve her goals in pragmatic contrast to society's traditional concept of marriage based on love and partnership (Bernthal 140).

"Her love affair, as you call it, is a very commonplace business. It is a step in the successful career of a very beautiful woman. If the Duke of Merton had neither a title nor wealth his romantic likeness to a dreamy monk would no longer interest the lady." (Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* 22) From this perspective, Jane's marriages end up being not only simply 'rich and profitable' but become part of the performance Jane performs and are thus presented as more scenic than the performing arts. In this way, Jane's gender performance becomes something bigger, it becomes a social performance in which aristocracy and the ritual of marriage are spectacularised (Bernthal 140).

But, as Christie repeatedly suggests, Jane's seductive and feminine appearance is nothing more than a façade: her stupidity, naivety and childish irresponsibility are shown to be somewhat calculated. Jane is aware of what society expects of her, knows what others believe her to be and manipulates this in order to carry out her criminal plan. Moreover, she is aware of what she is doing, she acts of her own will and consciously knows that she can be ruthless, but she certainly recognises her own guilt for the crimes she has committed and even shows pride in her own wilfulness. And so, she decides to kill her husband by committing the worst sin imaginable in order to avoid the more socially visible one of divorce and giving the appearance of following what religious tradition formally dictates: Jane is able to successfully disguise herself, socially and sexually, in what is the role and stereotype society envisages for her.

Jane emblematically represents Christie's willingness to go against the tendency of her contemporary society to stereotype femininity, which is a constant feature of her novels and one of the strengths of the whole variety and complexity of models of femininity she practised, with particular evidence in the creation of her female villains (Makinen 118). Jane plays with her beauty and carefreeness, leading men around her, such as Hastings and actor Bryan Martin, to see her as an attractive, childlike young woman whose 'natural' addiction to getting her own way makes her 'irresponsible' for her actions.

Some elements suggest that the murder with which Jane started her criminal escalation may have been the result of something more than her selfish desire to marry a duke to improve her social status. Lord Edgware is presented as a thoroughly unpleasant character, it is said of him that "he should never have married anyone" (Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* 15); he is not viewed with particular sympathy by those who knew him, not even by his daughter. The doubt arises, therefore, that Jane's crime, and her subsequent efforts to cover it up, rather than being a means to pave the way for a second marriage as she wanted people to believe, may have been as much an unconscionable act of revenge on the part of an abused or ignored wife.

As Butler argued, a woman's 'mask' conceals her desire for male authority; the mask that Jane consciously creates and enacts is that of her femininity forged to respond to the gaze and interpretation of men, and it is that mask that gives her power.

Jane kills three people, but while she simply poisons Carlotta, with her two male victims she uses stab wounds at the base of the skull, with a servant's knife (Bernthal 142). The gesture of penetrating male bodies indicates an assertion of power and control over the male gender, a control that Jane exerts over everything, even suppressing her first husband's consent to divorce: she makes sure that the marriage ends but entirely on her terms (Bernthal 142).

However, her performance is revealed when she does not comprehend Ross's classic reference to 'the judgement of Paris': "There is a mention of the 'judgement of Paris' and she takes Paris to be the only Paris she knows—the Paris of fashion and frills!" (Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* 198) The man talking about Paris had discussed the Trojan War with Carlotta disguised as 'Jane' at the dinner on the day of the murder without knowing that, in fact, she is not the same woman. The complete display of hollow femininity, the replacement of classical (masculine and cultured) knowledge with fashionable (feminine and superficial) knowledge, arbitrarily discloses Jane's 'true identity' as the murderess. This reveals the contrast between Carlotta, who, in her dinner speech, ends up temporarily removing the mask of the stupid

woman she was wearing in order to confront male knowledge on an equal level, and Jane, who still continues to stand on stage and play her role, not imagining that Carlotta had allowed herself to be sincere during her performance.

Jane's femininity and her artificiality are exaggerated in her interactions with men, as when, addressing Poirot, by widening her eyes and speaking in a "soft, low and deliciously seductive voice" (17), and on hearing the news of her husband's death she indulges in "hysterics", "a pretty act" (41) in such an exaggerated way that it deceives no one (Bernthal 142). Jane's insidious and stereotypical femininity allows Christie to criticise the way women's bodies are read, judged and identified through the presence of signs superficially deemed 'feminine': and indeed, when she introduces the portrayal of 'Jane the Murderess', she points out that anyone bearing or emulating these signs could be acting out that portrayal. It could be Jane, but not only that, it could be Carlotta or any other woman or even a man disguised as Jane, as Poirot speculates who, during the investigation, recalls that it could also have been his nephew and successor Ronald Marsh who killed Edgware.

By setting Jane's character within the historical era in which she is placed, she can be seen as the spokesperson for the feminist ideals that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th century, which gave rise to the idea of a "New Woman", a woman who represented women seeking greater independence, education and involvement in public life, challenging traditional gender roles and societal expectations. After all, Jane's main goal is to secure her independence and elevate her social status. Her success on stage demonstrates her ability to establish herself in a profession, her willingness to shape and control her personal life to achieve her goals reflects a break with traditional expectations of women's roles in relationships. Political and social activism: although Jane may not be explicitly involved in activism, her actions challenge societal norms and expectations regarding women's behaviour and roles. Her ambition and assertiveness highlight changing attitudes towards women's independence and autonomy.

Despite the novel's emphasis on clothes and fashions, Jane's body is continually and consciously constructed through the written word: the main evidence in Jane's favour is a letter in which Carlotta explains who commissioned her impersonation, a letter in which Jane, by tearing an 's' off the top of the page, makes "she" become "he" and reads as an accusation against a man (Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* 182). In other words, Jane hides not only behind gender stereotypes, but also behind her gender by renouncing it when necessary (Bernthal 143). In this episode, Jane also manages to play with another stereotype, that of the anti-Semitism typical of the English society of her time: Carlotta, in fact, is Jewish and the

stereotypical Jewish love of money makes it believable that she was paid to commit a crime. Jane uses Carlotta's ethnic origin and alleged sexual relations to her advantage to push suspicion of her as the perpetrator of the crime after her death; and to instil doubts about the woman's morality Jane cunningly makes the gold box from which her fatal dose of veronal was taken appear, passing it off as a gift from a male admirer who is imagined to have links both to her death and to the murder of Lord Edgware.

The novel concludes with 'A Human Document', the signed confession in which Jane accepts Poirot's labelling her a 'murderer' (189-92): even in that letter Jane maintains her mask of womanhood when she describes the pallor and thinness that accompanied the murder trial as enhancements of her beauty (192) or shows concern for clothes rather than emotions such as grief or guilt (189). As Foucault points out, confession has established itself in the West as "one of the principal rituals we rely on for the production of truth".

At the 'heart' and 'centre' of religious, scientific and political systems, confession establishes roles within the dynamics of power and authority; Foucault describes confession as "a ritual of discourse and power, which establishes the speaker as the subject/perpetrator/guilty person and the person confessed to as the authority, above the confessor." (Foucault, *Power Affects the Body* 207)

For Foucault, confession is "a sign of truth" as a vehicle of that truth, in a "hermeneutic" guise, which makes sin of that which must be confessed and which previously "could not be expressed" (*Power Affects the Body* 209). Jane's confession, however, rather than promoting a conclusive truth, is a means by which she explains that she is not as stupid as people think, and that she has "a real brain" (189). Jane reveals the key to her murderous plan, her hidden intelligence. She is an actress and with her acting skills she has managed to convince everyone of her feigned stupidity and that she could not come up with something clever: it is simply another way of flaunting her power, Jane's determination to control her destiny and her ability to remove obstacles, even unforeseen ones, from her path, subverting the stereotype of a woman as dependent and submissive.

In spite of this, however, Jane continues to mock a confessor's guilt and the insights into sin and religion that surround her, announcing the need to see a chaplain and concluding: "Yours forgivingly (because I must forgive my enemies, mustn't I?)" (Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* 192). This blatant lack of sincerity and repentance in Jane's confession makes the confession a mockery, thus undermining the traditional power and identity dynamics inherent in the practice. It is as if not even 'the killer' is Jane's true identity, but just another of her

roles, it is as if Jane's true and ultimate identity is problematically disguised by a perpetual masquerade (Bernthal 144).

It is significant that her confession is signed 'Jane Wilkinson' and not 'Lady Edgware', as she is rarely called despite "thinking much of her social position" (Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* 84): her name is probably the strongest sign of her female identity, it is the confirmation that, after accepting the role of 'murderess', she remains an individual on her own terms, as before, autonomous and free. However, this is followed by a postscript, so that instead of Jane's maiden name, the text ends with "They don't hang you in public anymore, do they? I think that's a pity. I'm sure there's never been a murderess like me before... P.S. Do you think they will put me in Madame Tussauds? (204)". Jane's desire to be hanged in public and her desire to become a wax statue represent her fantasy of immortality, of her body continuing to live. It is significant that her letter constitutes the chapter entitled 'A Human Document': it is as if this letter represents her own body, and her wish for it to be published represents a way of asking that her body and her story be recognised by those who are alive and by posterity: the signature, the final name embodying responsibility and the assumption of sin, is eclipsed by the reference to 'me', i.e. to a wax figure, 'at Madame Tussauds', which ensures that the performance does not stop but remains frozen at a stage of the career or lifespan.

### 6.2. Bella Tanios in Dumb Witness

Bella Tanios is the murderess in *Dumb Witness*, a novel written by Christie in 1937 that probably presents a simpler mystery than many of her others and that does not rely on the reader's expectations being overturned. It is received with mixed reviews by critics and many people speak unenthusiastically about it; among the novels written at the time, it is the only one to be a village mystery. Here, the victim, Emily Arundell, is the last survivor of a Victorian family that has resided in Market Basing for decades and with her disappearance all the family wealth arrives as an inheritance expected by her three grandchildren. Up to Chapter Five in the novel is Poirot's investigation in which he is seen questioning everyone Miss Emily had to deal with, and gathering their opinions on what is happening at Littlegreen House. Based on this beginning of the novel, it seems that Christie is trying to create more of a character-driven mystery, something more in line with her first novel; in the presentation of Emily's family, the typecasting of the types of characters she is often accused of is evident. Her nephew Charles is the *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* typical scoundrel: handsome,

charming and completely untrustworthy while his sister Theresa is the bright and wild young woman who, however, wants to 'marry well', with Dr Rex Donaldson, a very intelligent but cold and colourless man. Minnie Lawson is Emily's lady-in-waiting, silly and superstitious, who despite hating all of high society endures her employer's tyranny with acquiescence.

Bella is Emily's other niece, daughter of Cambridge University professor Biggs and his considerably younger wife Aribella Arundell; she and her husband, Dr Jacob Tanios, are perhaps the most interesting characters because the dynamic of their marriage is one of the greatest sources of tension in the novel. Bella is simple, a chemistry graduate who had obtained a professorship at the university but then decided to get married.

She married a Greek doctor more for love than to escape her fate as a spinster: "I realised at once, not that she feared her husband, but that she disliked him. [...]. Here was-not a self- indulgent woman-but a thwarted one. A plain girl, leading a dull existence, unable to attract the men she would like to attract, finally accepting a man she did not care for rather than being left an old maid." (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 229).

There are several points in the novel where Bella is presented as a ridiculous figure, inspiring pity: she is looked upon with benevolence by everyone but is thought to be hopelessly dull and ineffectual. To those who know her she is "definitely a dreary woman. Rather like an earwig. She's a devoted mother. So are earwigs, I believe." (111)

For example, Bella loves clothes and looks impatiently at her elegant cousin Theresa's wardrobe, which she despises and envies at the same time, so much so that she draws inspiration from it to dress herself, buying cheap copies of her chic clothes: "Bella's always hard up. Rather pathetic the way she tries to copy all my clothes at about an eighth of the price. Tanios speculated with her money; I believe. They're hard put to it to make both ends meet. They've got two children and want to educate them in England." (111)

Theresa is apparently the 'bad girl' and Bella the 'good girl': Theresa spends money indiscriminately, is "ultra-modern ... and terribly made-up", while Bella is "a rather nice woman - but utterly stupid and completely under her husband's control" (97). Bella and Theresa are, in fact, literally presented as mirror images of each other in the novel; emblematic, in this sense, is the play of initials that deceives Miss Lawson, who through her mirror is sure to identify as Theresa the woman who organises an initial attempt on Miss Emily Arundell's life because she was wearing a brooch with the initials "T.A.", for Theresa Arundell while in reality it is the letters A.T., for Arabella Tanios, reversed because seen through the mirror. Theresa's marriage at the end of the novel is also the mirror image of Bella's - when Theresa marries her beloved and intelligent Dr. Donaldson, she is absolved of

her wild, modern youth and slips comfortably into the role of a traditional wife, “incredibly happy and utterly involved in her husband’s career” (250). Although still in the subordinate role in the relationship, Theresa is happy to have married a man she loves, while the meek and motherly Bella, seemingly the opposite of the modern, elegant and rebellious Theresa, is the one who secretly despises her doctor husband and is unhappy enough in her marriage that she tries to blame her husband for a murder she commits.

Bella finds herself trapped in a joyless life in which her only source of happiness are her children Edward-John and Mary; and indeed, in the Butlerian view of the performance genre, her actions can be seen as conforming to society’s expectations for a protective and caring mother: “Four visitors will be quite enough,” said Miss Arundell. “In any case Bella spoils her children abominably. They never dream of doing what they are told.” Minnie Lawson murmured: “Mrs. Tanios is a very devoted mother.”” (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 7).

But also in this case, as it is for Jane Wilkinson, her conformity to the role of mother and wife, which initially seems to characterise her, is only apparent: Bella actually experiences the discomfort of a marriage that suffocates her, she no longer wants to continue living like that, she is tired of waiting and wants to take her children away from Jacob.

She planned to give her children the life they deserved with the money he would inherit, so she decided to accelerate her plans, decided to kill Emily and take the children with her once she had secured the money. Jacob would be the next to die, so she would be the only figure to influence and support her children.

“There was only one thing that illuminated her drab life, the expectation of her Aunt Emily’s death. Then she would have money, independence, the means to educate her children as she wished-and remember education meant a lot to her-she was a Professor’s daughter!” (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 230) Her first attempt is to drive a nail into the top of the stairs of the house and fix a wire with which to trip Emily so that she apparently ‘has an accident’ and dies. The plan only partially succeeds, Emily is severely injured but does not die from the fall and the family terrier, Bob, is blamed for her accident: its ball is blamed for the distraction by which Emily lost her balance.

At this point, Bella is forced to alter her plans by sucking up the gardener’s weed killer in order to use the arsenic as her next weapon; she uses her knowledge of chemistry, and cleverly converts the arsenic into elemental phosphorus, putting it into a capsule she has disguised as a pill for Emily’s liver problems. This time her plan works and leads to Emily’s death, which resident doctor John Grainger attributes to her liver failure.

But Poirot’s arrival destabilises her plan: the discovery of the nail that caused the fall

and the finding of the spent herbicide canister throw Bella into a panic, her plan is in danger of being discovered and so she surprises everyone by subverting their expectations of her as a passive and submissive wife and accuses Jacob of molesting her during her marriage. She blames Jacob as the one responsible for the murder and accuses him of planning to lock her up in an asylum to prevent her from testifying. She stays with Lawson until Poirot advises her to stay at a hotel and carefully examine the documents he has arranged for her. But at the hotel Bella is shocked to discover that Poirot has written down in a full description her crimes as they were committed. Overcome by the terror of facing judgement for her actions, and realising that she would never have her children, she burns the documents and commits suicide with the same chloral hydrate with which she planned to kill Jacob to support her children.

Bella, hiding behind the image of an affectionate and loving mother subservient to her Greek husband, uses him to confuse and mislead the investigators trying to restore order. “Her husband. You know, Mr. Poirot, the poor girl is quite under his thumb. She does anything he tells her. I daresay she’d murder someone if he told her to! And she’s afraid of him. I’m quite sure she's afraid of him. I’ve seen her look simply terrified once or twice. Now that isn’t right, Mr Poirot-you can’t say that’s right.” (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 119)

Her figure mirrors the ideas presented by Betty Friedan in *The Feminine Mystique,* a a pivotal work that helped shape the second wave of feminism in the 1960s. In it, the term *Feminine Mystique* refers to society’s general assumption that women only find concrete fulfilment in their lives as wives and mothers, and that their entire lives should be directed towards fulfilling these two exclusive roles. Once a woman had become a wife and mother, she would have no need of anything else, and thus it became pointless for her to pursue higher education, or to seek stimulating jobs, or to have opinions of her own on any subject that was not of interest to a housewife. A woman who aspired to be more than ‘just a housewife’, to have career ambitions, was perceived as unfeminine and often pitied for her incomplete life. Betty Friedan decided to discuss this problem and address the main reasons why the feminine mystique had become a trap from which women could no longer escape. Friedan calls the “problem that has no name” the widespread but often silent unhappiness of women housewives, an unhappiness described as a lack of identity, a “sense of boredom and passivity” or an “indefinite desire for ‘something more’” (Friedan 54) other than simply taking care of the home, husband and children. This problem was, at the time, shared by many middle-class women, women who, due to social pressure, kept the feeling of emptiness to themselves, and conformed to the role, expectations, and performance expected of the female

gender. The isolation and loneliness in which these women lived their condition meant that none of them really understood what they were experiencing or what exactly they should call their discomfort: that is why it became a nameless problem (Friedan 194). This nameless discomfort is what led Bella to take extreme actions: her crime can be seen as a response against the social constraints imposed by traditional femininity. Bella's role as a murderess reveals her capacity for violence and deception that break the archetype of the devoted wife and loving mother and give her the attribute of a criminal woman on a par with the man, according to that feminist view of crime that characterises Agatha Christie's female murderers.

From the 1920s until the 1940s, criminology's understanding of female criminals was largely influenced by Cesare Lombroso's 1893 work, *La Donna Delinquente*, in which he examined the skulls of convicted women to support his theories. The author deduced that women committed fewer crimes because they were less evolved and more like large children, and therefore had less cerebral capacity to commit degenerations. Female criminals were generally more inclined to prostitution than other criminal activities, and those few who did commit criminal acts were accused of being unfeminine, of lacking maternal feelings and of being unnaturally masculinised, being virile and therefore inherently evil and monstrous.

*Daughters of Cain* by Renee Huggett and Paul Berry, 1956 was perhaps the most popular book on women criminals: it tells the life stories of eight women executed since 1923, and states: "The woman criminal is often prompted by violent passions. Her victims and enterprises are not selected but discovered; she takes the near at hand, the obvious. Her behaviour arises out of her life and circumstances. The characteristics one may expect to find in criminal women are vanity; dishonesty; craftiness; sensuality; a violent temper; contradictory religious tendencies; a capacity to lead a double life; and the tendency to place oneself in tortuous situations."

Female violence is attributed to a condition of abnormality in which women are seen as helpless victims undeserving of severe punishment, leading to misogynistic portrayals of women criminals by the authors. They, for example, attribute the violent actions of the murderesses Susan Newell and Charlotte Bryant (1936) to their illiteracy and 'infantilise' reducing them to ignorant, stupid little girls who act driven by their irrational emotions, making their murders seem more like accidents or involuntary acts.

Margaret Allen (1948-49), on the other hand, a transvestite who called herself Bill, is driven to commit crimes by her 'virile' nature and hypothetically justified by the pathological aggravation of menopause. Upon learning of her husband's infidelity, Ethel Major (1934) is

portrayed as a victim of her own 'pride', and thus her guilt is justified by the hatred generated by the betrayal, while in the case of the Greek Cypriot Styllou Christofi, they justify the murder of her daughter-in-law by her fear of losing her son by turning her into a victim (Makinen 140). This 1950s book redefines the concept of aggressive femininity by associating it with a stereotype of ignorance and heightened emotionality, turning women into victims and thus as tending to be harmless, but becoming guilty due to their ignorance or emotionality, both seen as excessive displays of femininity. Contrary to Lombroso, who explains female criminal behaviour by an unnatural excess of masculinity, Huggett and Berry argue women become murderers due to the excess of their feminine attributes, due to their excess of ignorance and emotion. A similar conclusion can be drawn from examining newspaper reports on female murderers. Makinen analysed the *Daily Mirror* and the *Daily Sketch*, noting that the *Mirror's* prosecutions "strive to construct the women as mothers first and foremost, often of the most adulterous and un-nurturing women" (142). Picking up on the division between the sexes, the newspapers describe female criminals as rare, often framing women as the instigators of the violence they experience. Particularly in cases involving wives, lovers, or conflicts involving other men, women are portrayed as the 'cause' of their own deaths, transforming them from victims into the agents of their own tragic outcomes. They also normally argue that while men's anger may escalate to homicide, women's anger typically results in mere assaults. Moreover, the media suggests that men kill in more direct, active, or socially recognized ways, such as during fights, while in an intoxicated position, or while confronting law enforcement, portraying these acts as masculine. In contrast, women's aggression is trivialized as passive or defenceless, often tied to domestic contexts. Publications like *The Daily Mirror* further criticize women who reject traditional roles of housewife and mother, viewing them as transgressors against societal norms.

In this context, Agatha Christie's female murderers stand out thanks to the author's ability to accept women as murderers without demonising them for defying traditional gender roles. Instead, Christie acknowledges their independence, agency, and capacity to disrupt societal norms without resorting to gendered bias. They are portrayed "in exactly the same tone as male villains", demonstrating an equitable approach that transcends the usual gender divide (Makinen 135).

As much as Christie does not approve of female murderers, as she unequivocally depicts them as evil, her works challenge traditional cultural norms regarding gender by expanding the boundaries of femininity in subversive and circumvent ways. In her 1977 autobiography, reflecting on the nature of crime writing, she expresses that "the murderer is

tainted with the germs of ruthlessness and hatred, for whom the lives of others are worthless...in plain words, evil". In a period during and after the First World War, when British propaganda portrayed the enemy in frighteningly simplistic terms as evil, against the heroes of good, Christie distanced herself from this dichotomous view of good and evil by arguing for a more nuanced and psychological approach in her works. By the 1930s, Christie's application of psychological principles became more thorough, reflecting a deeper comprehension of the mechanisms of the psyche and the unconscious mind.

In *Dumb Witness* (1937), numerous psychological elements are present: a doctor even diagnoses Bella with "a complete nervous breakdown" accompanied by "delusions" and "persecution mania" alongside a prescribed "psychological cure" (200-1). Here, 'the psychology' of the murderer serves as the 'key clue' in uncovering their identity. Unlike many Christie's villains, both male and female, often labelled as immoral egoists or madmen, in *Dumb Witness* the murderess is neither. Bella is presented as a female murderer in an ambivalent way. She is the murderer of the elderly, wealthy aunt who, however, is ultimately revealed as a tragic figure: a grey, unhappy woman trapped in a loveless marriage to a Greek doctor who, after she commits suicide, pronounces: "She was too good for me, always. A strange epitaph on a confessed murderess!" (249). Such a depiction at the climax of the epilogue supports that Christie's murderers, rather than evoking straightforward horror or repugnance, reveal an expression of ambiguous and fascinating complexity, ranging from the heinous to the surprisingly attractive (Makinen, 136). Christie's sensitivity, or to be more exact, her acute understanding of the multifaceted nature of crime and criminality, allows us to understand her portrayal of Bella as a female murderer, aware of herself, her will, her propensity for criminality and her violence.

Bella's involvement in the murder is driven by the need to free herself from oppressive circumstances and to assert her dimension outside that of a submissive woman completely engulfed by the domestic sphere, highlighting a subversion towards traditional maternal and feminine roles: "She had at that time two objects, to detach herself and her children from Dr. Tanios and to obtain her share of the money. Then she would have what she wanted-a rich contented life in England with her children." (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 231)

Her actions show that she takes an active role in criminal activity, demonstrating her ability to make significant decisions independently of her husband, indeed against her husband decisions, which show her capacity for manipulation, her strategic skill, far from the traditional view of female criminals as passive, who found justification for their criminal propensity in their lack of femininity, excess of ignorance, or emotions. Apart from the first

murder attempt, the one with the wire on the stairs, which demonstrates naivety and simplicity, the other attempts to kill Emily are complex, elaborate and technical as Poirot himself notes: “She may have already planned the crime, or had the idea of it in her mind, before she came to England. She had a certain knowledge of chemistry, having assisted her father in the laboratory....” and “Then, when she came to Littlegreen House, a simpler method presented itself to her. The dog’s ball-a thread or string across the top of the stairs. A simple, ingenious woman’s idea. And so, quietly and determinedly, this self-contained, unhappy, ambitious woman put her original plan into execution.” (230)

“Both crimes had roughly the same outline. They were both simple. They were cunning, and carried out with efficiency. They required a certain amount of knowledge but not a great deal. The facts about phosphorus poisoning are easily learned, and the stuff itself, as I say, is quite easily obtained, especially abroad”. (227-228)

Evidence of her strategic skill is manifest in the rapid change in her behaviour towards her husband, Jacob Tanios. Initially, she presents herself as devoted to and subjugated by him, a dynamic that is reinforced by the stereotype of the foreign man of Greek origin. The character of Jacob evinces Christie’s typical Greek characterisation (which shares considerable similarities with the Jewish one) and is imbued with racial stereotypes that serve to deceive the reader. Jacob is described as having a keen sense of financial perception. It is notable that the character of Tanios is repeatedly described as a Greek, with the implication being that this is a racial stereotype. This is evident in the repetition of the phrase “Trust a Greek for that” (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 22), which is also used by other characters on pp. 86 and 129. The character is also said to have speculated with his wife’s money, which is presented as a further example of his questionable financial conduct. This is used by Bella to her advantage when she realises her plan is about to be discovered, as she attempts to blame Tanios for the murder. The character then exhibits a sudden change in behaviour, displaying fear and anxiety towards her husband. She states, “It's been so horrible – for years now. It’s been like a long nightmare” (222), before accusing him of being the murderer. Even if she fails to convince Poirot, the narrative demonstrates a strategic approach to every detail, from the way the story is structured to the way the characters interact:

There remained Mrs. Tanios. As soon as I saw her I realised that she was afraid. She saw that I realised that and she very quickly made capital out of that momentary betrayal. She gave a very convincing portrait of a woman who is afraid for her husband. A little later she changed her tactics. It was very cleverly done-but the change did not deceive me. A woman can be afraid for her husband or she can be afraid of her husband-but she can hardly be both.

Mrs. Tanios decided on the latter rôle-and she played her part cleverly[…] When her husband followed her as she knew he would, she pretended that she could not speak before him. (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 229).

Bella becomes the icon of the failure to apply Butler's theories of performative gender to the real life of women; she is the demonstration that the traditionally subordinate domestic role that society expects women to play can only lead inexorably to failure.

In fact, Bella dedicates her life to slavishly doing everything required by her role as a woman, and thus to renouncing her eventual career as a teacher in order to get married so as to avoid becoming an 'old maid', to behaving as a devoted and submissive wife towards her husband so as to give him control of her property, to covering the role of a loving and affectionate mother so as to devote herself totally to the care of her children and go so far as to do anything to ensure the best for them in life guided by the values and principles she has been taught herself. But in spite of this, Bella spent her life in a state of frustration and dissatisfaction, envying her cousin who was free and heedless of the rules; and it was this same frustration that made a condition that apparently seemed flat and ordinary unbearable for her, and it was the resulting destructive circumstances that turned her into a silent killer (Hoffman 166).

Even Bella's death by suicide, resulting from an overdose of sleeping, is influenced in part by Poirot's subtle encouragement, as he suggests to her: "It is the children you must think of, madame, not yourself. You love your children" (Christie, *Dumb Witness* 158), is further confirmation of the failure of Butler's gender performances: Bella cannot bear to be subjected to a public trial and execution, her role as a mother forces her to end her troubled existence in a private and domestic manner.

In the end, Bella's criminality is nothing more than the result of cultural expectations of the role of women, expectations that Bella manages to initially manipulate as a form of masquerade, but in the face of which she ends up succumbing and being swallowed.

# 7. Conclusion

This thesis does not set out to examine all of Agatha Christie's impressive and varied literary output. Instead, it aims to provide an insight into the way in which the author addresses and incorporates some significant themes into her work, contextualising them within the historical period in which they were written is also of interest. This includes themes such as society's discriminatory attitude towards different genders, the nature of criminality and the criminal instinct in man, the relationship between power and knowledge, between power and truth, and how these differ for men and women. This is achieved by examining four of Agatha Christie's numerous works, identifying their defining characteristics, and considering the theories of philosophers such as Michel Foucault and authors such as Betty Friedan. This allows for a comprehensive and accurate interpretation of the works in question.

It is evident that, irrespective of her personal views, Christie was capable of portraying a diverse range of characters, both female and male, in her novels. In examining the criminals, it is notable that virtually all are identified as murderers in her novels. These characters are diverse in terms of age, social status, and profession, assuming different roles within the plot. Some novels are narrated in the first person, while others are narrated by third parties. However, almost every novel includes a clarifying parenthesis in which the murderer has the opportunity to confess his guilt, explain his motivations, and potentially analyse the events that led to his confession. In many instances, this is achieved through written communication from the murderer, which is sometimes read posthumously, either after the murderer has been incarcerated or after their own demise. The analysis presented here has focused on the role of the murderers, specifically on two male and two female characters. While this is a relatively limited sample compared to the multitude of criminal characters created by Christie, it is sufficient to allow for the drawing of some interesting considerations that can be extended to many of the criminal characters in her detective novels.

In the context of Agatha Christie's work, a murderer is defined as an individual who must be held accountable for their criminal actions. However, the form this accountability takes is not limited to conventional methods. In some instances, the perpetrator may even be responsible for their own punishment through the act of taking their own life. Nevertheless, there are significant distinctions between male and female murderers. These differences reflect societal expectations of them and align with Butler's concept of performative gender. In this concept, men are expected to embody hegemony and power, while women are expected to embody frivolity, passivity, and attachment to family and home.

In contrast to the male murderers, the female murderers do not conform to the expected elements of their performances. In Christie's novels, the female criminals are not submissive, not subjugated by men or forced to commit crime because they are driven by their inferior status to the male gender or because they are unaware of the consequences of their gestures and actions because of their ignorance or their emotional fragility. Rather, they are women with a criminal will of their own, aware of the role society assigns to them and the expectations others have of them. They are resolute and intelligent women, who instead of being overwhelmed by the shell in which gender discrimination wants to confine them, know how to exploit what society expects of them to manipulate the condition in which they live to confuse investigations and divert suspicion. They are the full expression of the concept of "New Women," representing the feminist ideal that emerged in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which represented women's demand for greater independence and equity (Freedman 7).

Both Jane Wilkinson and Bella Thanos commit their crimes because they are motivated by the need to break free from social constraints and assert control over their lives and status in a world dominated by men. Crime becomes a tool with which to achieve their main goal of securing their independence and obtaining financial security. In this sense, Agatha Christie can be seen as a forerunner of the wave of feminism that would sweep the entire planet in the 1960s.

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## 9. The portrayal of male and female murderers in selected novels of Agatha Christie: Summary and key words

Detective fiction, the sub-genre of crime fiction, has always provoked an intense interest among the readers and served them as a leisure activity, especially the works of Agatha Christie known as the "Queen of Crime." Since many scholars, critics and academics tend to focus more on the figures of Agatha Christie's most famous detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple and less on her fictional villains, this master's thesis deals with different portrayals of male and female murderers in the selected novels of Agatha Christie: *And Then There Were None*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, *Lord Edgware Dies and Appointment with Death*. The paper offers an insight into the historical and social context of interwar Britain, specifically from 1918 to 1939, in order to understand the period in which the novels were written. The changes after the First World War were also reflected in shifting or renegotiating traditional gender roles, especially those of women who began to participate more actively in the male-dominated English society. This thesis aims to analyse how Agatha Christie's male and female murderers both conform to and challenge gender norms, revealing the complex interplay of power, gender identity, and societal expectations in the context of detective fiction during the interwar period.

**Key words**: detective fiction, interwar period, Agatha Christie, murderers, gender, masculinity, femininity, power dynamics

## 10. Prikaz muških i ženskih ubojica u odabranim djelima Agathe Christie: Sažetak i ključne riječi

Detektivska fikcija, podžanr kriminalističke fikcije, oduvijek je izazivala snažan interes među čitateljima i služila im kao oblik razonode, posebno djela Agathe Christie poznate kao "Kraljica krimića." S obzirom na to da mnogi učenjaci, kritičari i akademici često više pažnje posvećuju najpoznatijim detektivima Agathe Christie, Herculeu Poirotu i Miss Marple, a manje njezinim fiktivnim zlikovcima, ovaj diplomski rad bavi se različitim prikazima muških i ženskih ubojica u odabranim romanima Agathe Christie: *And Then There Were None, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Lord Edgware Dies* i *Appointment with Death.* Rad nudi uvid u povijesni i društveni kontekst Velike Britanije između dva svjetska rata, posebno u razdoblju od 1918. do 1939. godine, kako bi se razumio period u kojem su romani napisani. Promjene nakon Prvog svjetskog rata također su se odrazile u pomicanju ili pregovaranju tradicionalnih rodnih uloga, osobito uloga žena koje su počele aktivnije sudjelovati u engleskom društvu kojim dominiraju muškarci. Cilj ovog diplomskog rada je analizirati kako muški i ženski ubojice Agathe Christie istovremeno slijede i izazivaju rodne norme, otkrivajući složenu interakciju moći, rodnog identiteta i društvenih očekivanja u kontekstu detektivske fikcije tijekom međuratnog razdoblja.

**Ključne riječi:** detektivska fikcija, međuratno razdoblje, Agatha Christie, ubojice, rod, maskulinitet, feminitet, dinamika moći