

# Dining Room Detectives



# Dining Room Detectives:

*Analysing Food in the Novels  
of Agatha Christie*

By

Silvia Baučeková

Cambridge  
Scholars  
Publishing



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This book first published 2015

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-4438-7762-X

ISBN (13): 978-1-4438-7762-6

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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Firstly, I would like to thank doc. Mgr. Slávka Tomaščíková, PhD. for giving me the opportunity to complete my doctoral research and to spend a considerable period of my studies abroad; and prof. Nieves Pascual Soler for her invaluable guidance and support, without which I would never have been able to complete the present work. Secondly, I would like to thank my colleagues, especially Mária, Veronika, and Silvia, for always being willing to discuss any problems that came up, give useful feedback, and share tips. I would also like to express my gratitude to my proofreader Mr Gavin Cowper for his excellent and efficient work, as well as to Mr Sam Baker, my editor at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, for his patience and willingness to answer my incessant newbie questions. Finally, I would like to thank my family for their patience and encouragement throughout the whole writing process.





## INTRODUCTION

Hercule Poirot was sitting at the breakfast table. At his right hand was a steaming cup of chocolate.

He had always had a sweet tooth. To accompany the chocolate was a brioche. It went agreeably with chocolate.

He nodded his approval. This was from the fourth shop he had tried. It was a Danish patisserie but infinitely superior to the so-called French one near by. That had been nothing less than a fraud.

He was satisfied gastronomically. His stomach was at peace. His mind also was at peace, perhaps somewhat too much so.

[...] The truth of the matter was, he was bored. All this strenuous mental activity in which he had been indulging—there had been too much of it. It had got him into bad habits, it had made him restless.

Vexatious! He shook his head and took another sip of chocolate.

*(Third Girl, 7-8)*

Gerda lifted a teacup and drank.

“It is all so very worrying. Everything is so worrying . . . You see, John always arranged everything and now John is gone . . .” Her voice tailed off. “Now John is gone . . .”

Her gaze, piteous, bewildered, went from one to the other.

[...]

Gerda leaned back in her chair. Her lips were very blue. She said stiffly: “I feel—not very well—if John—John—”

Poirot came round the table to her and eased her sideways down the chair. Her head dropped forward. He bent and lifted her eyelid. Then he straightened up. “An easy and comparatively painless death.”

Henrietta stared at him. “Heart? No.” Her mind leaped forward. “Something in the tea . . . Something she put there herself. She chose the way out?”

Poirot shook his head gently. “Oh, no, it was meant for you. It was in your teacup.” *(The Hollow, 287-288)*

“I was thinking of when my mother died. I was five I think. Five or six. I was having dinner in the nursery, jam roll pudding. I was very fond of jam roll pudding. One of the servants came in and said to my nursery governess, ‘Isn’t it awful? There’s been an accident and Mrs Craddock has been killed.’ . . . Whenever I think of my mother’s death, d’you know what I see?”

“What?”

“A plate with jam roll pudding on it, and I’m staring at it. Staring at it and I can see as well now as then, how the jam oozed out of it at one side. I didn’t cry or say anything. I remember just sitting there as though I’d been frozen stiff, staring at the pudding. And d’you know, even now if I see in a shop or a restaurant or in anyone’s house a portion of jam roll pudding, a whole wave of horror and misery and despair comes over me.”  
(*The Mirror Crack’d from Side to Side*, 309)

In order to live, humans need to eat. This need to eat is so self-evident and the everyday presence of meals in our lives is so much taken for granted that it might seem somewhat pointless to discuss whether or not food is important in human life. It is understood as omnipresent and essential. However, a less obvious aspect of the presence of food in life is the role which it plays in literature in general, and in crime fiction and the novels of Agatha Christie in particular. Firstly, it is necessary to ask whether food is in fact present in crime fiction, and, if so, why focus on it? Is it of any importance whatsoever? What function does it serve in the texts in question?

The answer to the first of these questions is most definitely yes, as the introductory examples illustrate. In fact, when reading through the novels, I discovered that Agatha Christie mentioned food multiple times in every single novel. Hercule Poirot, Christie’s most famous detective, can frequently be observed sipping his cup of chocolate, and Miss Marple, another of the author’s fictional sleuths, performs a great deal of her investigative work over the course of afternoon teas. Christie’s minor characters are also often found sitting around the breakfast or dinner table, and regularly throw cocktail parties, visit restaurants, or reminisce about the foods of their childhood.<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Christie, who shared her fictional detectives’ distaste for aggression, blood and violence, employed fast acting and relatively painless poisons as her criminals’ weapon of choice in the overwhelming majority of her stories (Acocella 2010). And with this use of poison, food and drink enter the crime novel once again. After all, where better to conceal a deadly dose of morphine or arsenic than in a nice warm cup of tea or in a piece of cream cake?

Paradoxically, because food is such a basic, unavoidable part of life, it is often overlooked in analyses of fiction, as depictions of characters eating can seem obvious and natural enough. Yet in this book, food and eating are understood as anything but obvious and natural. The book examines how references to various meals and drinks contribute to the effect of the crime novels of Agatha Christie. It aims to show how depictions of food are used to influence or construct characters, plots, or settings and serve as literary devices; it also intends to examine how the

author uses them to tackle issues of identity, crime, or memory. In other words, I aim to answer the three questions listed in the first paragraph of this introduction by proving that the presence of food in Christie's novels is not merely a consequence of the characters' need for food. Instead, it is assumed that food plays a more crucial role, and an attempt is made to explain the nature of this role (or these roles). However, it is first necessary to introduce the figure who occupies an equally crucial place in the analysis and that is Agatha Christie herself.

## **The Protagonist: Dame Agatha Christie**

Dame Agatha Christie was born on September 15, 1890 as Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller to Clara and Frederick Miller. Agatha had two elder siblings, Madge and Monty (Akersten 2010, 16). The family lived in Ashfield, a large Victoria villa (Dorn 1997, 50) in the coastal town of Torquay, Devon. Agatha was a solitary child. She was much younger than her two siblings and was home-schooled, an experience which deprived her of the opportunity to meet other children of her age (Acocella 2010). When she was five years old, her father lost his income and, because members of the upper classes such as himself were not prepared for regular employment, he was unable to find a job. He died at the age of fifty-five, leaving Agatha in the care of her mother.

Agatha got married for the first time at the beginning of World War One at the age of twenty-four (Acocella 2010). Her husband, Colonel Archibald Christie (Dorn 1997, 50), was a member of the Royal Flying Corps. During the war he served on the Western Front, while Agatha worked in the dispensary of a war hospital in her hometown. After the war the couple moved to London and had one child together—a daughter called Rosalind. It was during this time in London that Christie first began writing fiction (Acocella 2010). Her “experiences in a World War One dispensary [...] gave her a working knowledge of poisons,” which she made use of when constructing her first detective plots (Mills and Waites 2008).

After the death of her mother in 1926, Agatha moved back to her parents' house “to ready it for sale.” During this period, her husband informed her of his relationship with an acquaintance, Nancy Neele, and filed for divorce. A couple of months later Agatha disappeared from her home, and was only discovered a number of days later by the police. For the rest of her life, Christie refused to explain both the reason for her disappearance, and the exact circumstances of the event. However, as the

event coincided with one of Christie's major professional successes—the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), it led to a great amount of public attention for both Christie and her writing, and helped to establish her as a prominent figure on the British literary scene (Acocella 2010).

In 1930, Christie remarried. Her second husband, Max Mallowan, was an archaeologist (Dorn 1997, 50). Accompanying him to the sites of excavations, Christie undertook a number of journeys to the Middle East and these visits are reflected in the choice of settings for several of her novels (e.g. *Murder in Mesopotamia*; *Appointment with Death*, *Death on the Nile*) (Akersten 2010, 15). However, despite her success as a writer, Christie reminisced in her *An Autobiography* ([1977] 2011) that she never considered herself a professional author. She wrote: “I was a married woman, that was my status, and that was my occupation. As a sideline, I wrote books. I never approached my writing by dubbing it with the grand name of ‘career’. I would have thought it ridiculous” (430).

Despite this belief on her part, Christie's writing definitely became a career and she became a best-selling author, publishing over eighty books in her lifetime (“Dame Agatha Christie” 2013); to date, approximately two billion copies of her works have been sold worldwide (Akersten 2010, 15). Indeed, Christie's profits were such that she was able to support her family members, as well as various charities by donating the rights to her stories or theatre plays (Christie [1977] 2011, 512-513). Moreover, as a member and, from 1958, also the president of the Detection Club (Keating n.d.), Christie not only wrote crime stories, but was also actively involved in forming what would later become known as the Golden Age of detective fiction, a literary movement in its own right (see below). At the end of her life, Christie moved to Wallingford, a historic town in the vicinity of Oxford, where she died on January 12, 1976. She is buried at Cholsey (Dorn 1997, 50).

Christie “began publishing detective fiction thirty-three years after [Sir Arthur] Conan Doyle” and to some extent her work draws on Conan Doyle's heritage through themes such as “the small place, the interrogations, [and] the revelation” (Acocella 2010). Her first attempt at composing a detective story dates back to 1915 and was prompted by “a challenge by her sister Madge.” The novel was rejected by three publishers before it was finally published in 1921 as *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (Dorn 1997, 50). Between *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, Christie published over sixty detective novels (Carter and McRae 2001, 368). A number of these form part of one of her three major series: the Poirot mysteries, the Miss Marple mysteries, and

the Tommy and Tuppence series. Poirot is by far the most frequently occurring of her detectives, and his crime-solving career spans thirty-three novels and fifty-one short stories (“Zabila som Poirota, vážení!” 2013, 6). Christie’s second most popular detective, Miss Marple, appears in twelve novels and twenty short stories (7).

The “dapper, meticulous, diminutive Belgian detective, Hercule Poirot” first entered the scene in Christie’s very first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (Dorn 1997, 50). Poirot is a former member of the Belgian police force who left his home country as a war refugee (Dorn 1997, 50) and who has now established himself in Britain as a private investigator. He is depicted as a typical eccentric detective, who

dyes his hair, [...] smokes thin, black Russian cigarettes, often regarded with alarm by those to whom he offers them; he wears pointy patent-leather shoes ill-suited to walking the grounds of the country houses where he must often do his sleuthing. He deplores the English preference for fresh air, thin women, and tea. Poirot says that, in interrogations, he always exaggerates his foreignness. The person being questioned then takes him less seriously, and in consequence tells him more. His Franglais is a treat. “I speak the English very well,” he says proudly. (Acocella 2010)

The Poirot series ends with *Curtain*, which is also the last of Christie’s novels to be published in her lifetime (Carter and McRae 2001, 368). Both the first and the last novel focus on the motifs pervading the whole series: “the bond between Poirot and Hastings; Poirot’s commitment to carrying out justice, sometimes in unconventional ways; and his interest in promoting romance.” Although Hastings is not present in all of the Poirot mysteries, he re-emerges time and time again and also plays a part in the very last novel, *Curtain* (Knepper 2005, 75).

Miss Marple was first introduced to readers in a series of short stories which were later published collectively as *The Thirteen Problems* (1932) (Knepper 2005, 78). The first novel in the Marple series, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, was published in 1930 (Dorn 1997, 50). The Marple series is characterised by the frequent employment of the “garden motif,” but also by its “emphasis on evil, and the emphasis on illicit love.” Christie ties the two together by drawing symbols of evil “from plant and garden lore” (Knepper 2005, 74). Miss Marple is as eccentric and memorable as Poirot, although in a different way: “her benign countenance, fragility, and Victorian attire” (78) are placed in marked opposition to her inborn instinct for discovering evil, “her tendency to think the worst of human nature, and her unshockability. Her nephew Raymond, a city sophisticate, is naïveté itself in comparison to his old aunt who lives quietly in a

country village and misses nothing that happens there” (79). Marple is frequently described as “determined,” or even “ruthless” (78) and carries out a strict surveillance over the other inhabitants of her home village, St. Mary’s Mead. She is not officially allowed to interrogate, as she is neither a policewoman nor a detective; nevertheless, she is always able to gather the information she needs. She blends in perfectly with the environment and can thus observe events unnoticed; moreover she is not averse to being nosy, or even to “snooping” (Acocella 2010).

The third of Christie’s series, the Tommy and Tuppence series, differs from the previous two in that it features not one detective, but instead two cooperating investigators, a pair of friends (later husband and wife) Tommy and Tuppence. This series exhibits traits of the adventure novel and thriller genres to a much greater extent than the other two. The first Tommy and Tuppence novel, *The Secret Adversary*, was published in 1922. In this novel the two protagonists meet in London after they have finished service in the war and make plans to “establish themselves economically and find adventures in the postwar world.” Their plans, of course, involve solving mysteries, uncovering spies, and catching criminals (Knepper 2005, 76).

This first Tommy and Tuppence thriller expresses the high spirits of young people in love and combines the talents of the impulsive, brilliant, theatrical Tuppence with the dogged tenaciousness and common sense of Tommy. In the later Tommy and Tuppence spy-chasing novels, their marriage evolves over time. The couple have children; worry about those grown-up children during World War II; and chafe at the perception of their children and the government that they are over the hill, too old to ferret out spies and solve mysteries. As an older couple, they deal with the discomforts of aging and enjoy the satisfying companionship found in a long-term marriage. (76-77)

Another notable recurring character in Christie’s works is the crime author Ariadne Oliver, a character who is based to a certain extent on Agatha Christie herself. Mrs Oliver solves crimes together with Poirot, replacing the faithful Captain Hastings in a number of novels. She first appears in *Cards on the Table* (1936), where she was portrayed as the impulsive and energetic opposite of the orderly and passive Poirot. However, Christie also used Oliver to voice some of her ideas about writing detective stories and about the lifestyles of popular authors. The last novel featuring Mrs Oliver is *Elephants Can Remember* (Knepper 2005, 76), published in 1972 (69).

Christie was an extremely productive writer, and throughout her career she wrote over eighty books (“Dame Agatha Christie” 2013). In addition to the detective novel series, Christie wrote numerous stand-alone crime novels (*Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*; *The Pale Horse*), spy novels (*Passenger to Frankfurt*), and thrillers (*They Came to Baghdad*). She also wrote six romance novels under the pen name Mary Westmacott (Akersten 2010, 16).

In addition to fiction, Christie also wrote drama. In her autobiography, she explained her decision to become a playwright as a reaction to unsuccessful co-operations with other authors who wished to adapt her novels for the stage. As an example she mentioned *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which had been turned into a play under the title *Alibi*. She recalled disliking the ideas of the dramatist, who wished to “take about 20 years off Poirot's age, call him Beau Poirot, have lots of girls in love with him and give him a strong love interest” (Christie 2010). The first of Christie's plays was *The Mousetrap*, which was originally broadcast on BBC radio as *Three Blind Mice* (510). The radio play was commissioned as a birthday present for Queen Mary, but it was later prolonged and adapted for stage production. It was performed for the first time on November 25, 1952 at the Ambassadors Theatre (Dorn 1997, 50) with Richard Attenborough and Sheila Sim as the lead actors (Christie 2011, 512). In 1974 the play was moved to St. Martin's Theatre where it is still performed today (Dorn 1997, 50), making it one of the longest-running plays in the history of theatre (“Dame Agatha Christie” 2013). Another of Christie's famous plays is *Witness for The Prosecution* (1948), “which won the New York Drama Critics' Award for Best Foreign Play of 1954” (Dorn 1997, 50).

In 1971 Christie was awarded the title of Dame Commander, Order of the British Empire (“Dame Agatha Christie” 2013) and in 1977 she published her autobiography (Christie 2010, 28). In the meantime, other authors started to write about Christie or produce their own adaptations of her work. A number of her plays were turned into novels by Charles Osborne (e.g. *Black Coffee* in 1998) and many of her works were adapted for television. Poirot has been played by various actors, most notably by David Suchet, who has played the role in adaptations of all but one of the Poirot stories (“Zabila som Poirota, vážení!” 2013, 7).

Books about Christie abound too. A number of authorised, as well as unauthorised biographies emerged, such as *Duchess of Death: The Unauthorized Biography of Agatha Christie* (2009) by Richard Hack or *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks: Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making* (2011) by John Curran. The notebooks contain excerpts from

seventy-three of the author's journals with notes, unused material, illustrations and two Poirot stories which were not published during the author's life. However, there is a relative lack of recorded material featuring Christie herself, as the writer "valued her privacy and rarely granted interviews" (Dorn 1997, 50). Two of the rare recordings of the author's voice include "a 1955 interview for the BBC and a 1974 recording for the Imperial War Museum Sound Archive." Because of this reluctance to speak about herself, much of Christie's life remains as mysterious as her plots, attracting the attention and stirring the imagination of fans, and thus further increasing the famous writer's appeal (Mills and Waites 2008).

Christie is frequently nicknamed the "Queen of Crime," and indeed, she remains the most successful of all of the Golden Age crime authors and the most widely read crime author of all time (Carter and McRae 2001, 368). Her novels have been translated into an estimated forty-five languages (Acocella 2010) and, according to the Guinness Book of World Records, only the works of William Shakespeare and the Bible have bested her in terms of the number of copies sold (Knepper 2005, 70). Moreover, Christie's work is accessible even to those who have not read her books in the form of numerous TV adaptations (71).

Christie was a typical Golden Age author, but she also had no qualms about breaking the rules which she had helped to set up—a technique which kept her audience interested and attracted more and more readers. Indeed, one of the factors determining the selection of Christie as the author to be analysed was her huge readership. Christie's overwhelming and lasting popularity invites scholarly interest, as one cannot help but be intrigued by the secret of her success. Another reason which led me to choose to focus on Christie was that she was a female writer. As will be explained later on, the beginning of the twentieth century was characterised by a rapid feminisation of the crime fiction genre: as the audience became predominately female, more and more female authors began to be published, and even the formula of the crime novel itself was changed to reflect the concerns of its female authors and readers (see 1.1.4; 1.2.3). As I concentrated on the place of food, which is traditionally understood as a feminine pursuit (see chapter two), in the detective novel, I found it especially interesting to see how a female crime writer treated such a "feminine" topic in her novels. The following section lists additional information on the choice of specific texts for the analysis, the methods employed, and the hypotheses set up before tackling the analysis itself.



## **The Analysis: Food in Crime Fiction**

The detective story is now a well-established literary genre with a history dating back to the nineteenth century and the writings of Edgar Allan Poe. As such, it has received a considerable amount of critical and academic interest, both from the crime authors themselves (E.A. Poe, Dorothy L. Sayers, G.K. Chesterton, etc.) and from literary critics and scholars. At the beginning of the twentieth century, during what is now known as the Golden Age of detective fiction, more authors began publishing crime stories than ever before, and the genre began to attract the attention of structuralist literary critics, such as Tzvetan Todorov or John Cawelti, who pointed out the formulaic nature of popular genre literature (see chapter one). Crime authors themselves claimed to write their stories following strict rules, creating puzzles governed by set principles. Therefore, a structuralist methodology would appear to be highly suitable for the analysis of detective novels, especially those of the Golden Age period, and that is the reason why this approach is also adopted in this book.

Although a number of scholars have already tackled the issue of the detective novel, much less attention has been focused on the issue of food in literature in general, and even less on food in crime fiction.<sup>2</sup> The structuralist understanding of food is that it is socially and culturally significant and not merely a result of necessity and economy (see 2.1), and this belief informs the analysis to a great extent. However, the structuralist approach alone did not prove sufficient to explain the phenomenon of food as a literary device in crime fiction. Therefore this book adopts a more eclectic approach, combining structuralism with other schools of thought such as feminism, phenomenology, or psychoanalytic theory, and incorporating notions of identity, class, and nation as understood in the field of cultural studies, in an attempt to account for the various occurrences and functions of food which can be found in the analysed texts.

In the process of writing this book, I have been frequently asked by colleagues and friends who were familiar with the topic of my research whether there is any connection between food and crime fiction, whether I could find any references to food in these texts, and, in general, what the point of studying food in literature was. Even the most cursory reading of Christie's novels can show without a doubt that there is food in crime fiction, and that there is plenty of it. Characters eat, entertain each other at dinners, and take care of, feed and poison each other with food. However, the question remains of why food is so closely tied up with crime.

Some possible answers to this question are delineated in section 2.4.1. However, at this point I would like to draw attention to two striking parallels between cooking and crime novels. Firstly, my analysis takes as its starting point the structuralist understanding of crime fiction as a formula, i.e. the text as a whole composed of prescribed ingredients according to a set of established rules. It is interesting to note that the same definition applies to the process of cooking a meal according to a recipe: there also is a list of necessary ingredients and certain methods which must be applied in order to create the final dish. Thus the classical detective formula can be understood as a recipe according to which authors, including Agatha Christie, cook up the meals which they serve to their readers: the murder mysteries.

Secondly, crime fiction and food share the paradoxical connection of pleasure and death. This connection is, in fact, the driving force of the crime novel: the reader is entertained and given a pleasant frisson of excitement by reading about murder. In this respect, the act of eating is strikingly similar; when one eats, one can enjoy the delicious tastes and smells of food and the subsequent pleasure of being sated, but at the same time the act of eating necessarily implies death, whether that be the death of the vegetable or animal one is eating, or the potential threat of death as a result of consuming spoilt, poisonous, or infected foods.

Thus, the hypothesis which has been set up on the basis of the above described parallels, and which represents the driving force behind the analysis of the novels, is essentially that food does not appear in Agatha Christie's novels by mere coincidence. On the contrary, it is assumed that Christie deliberately used food as a literary device, employing it in characterisation, as a tool for constructing plots and in depictions of settings. Moreover, food also serves as a means of destabilising the accepted rules and characteristics of the genre of classical detective fiction, as well as of satirising, or even directly questioning, established notions and stereotypes in society as a whole. By choosing food as the primary concern, I intend to focus on the trend of feminisation of the crime formula which took place at the beginning of the twentieth century. Throughout the analysis I argue that the reason why Christie made use of food references and food imagery so frequently was that thanks to its strong association with women, femininity and domesticity, food enabled her to feminise an otherwise inherently masculine form of writing: the detective story.

By conducting this analysis I hope to expand contemporary Christie scholarship and offer a new, alternative way of analysing literary formulas. Throughout the writing of this book, I have discovered that food

has for the most part been ignored by academics in the field of humanities in the Central European context. Therefore, this work would like to bring both food in a general sense and also food as a specific method in the study of literature to attention as topics for academic discussion.

For reasons which were outlined above, the scope of this analysis is limited to only one author, Agatha Christie, but this focus is also limited to only one part of her work, her novels. The decision to focus on Christie's novels rather than on her short stories or her plays was made for two reasons. Firstly, a novel typically places much more emphasis on details than shorter texts and thus offers more space for descriptions of habits, background, characters and, consequently, of food. The length of a novel allows the author more opportunities to employ food as a device of characterisation, description, or as a means of social commentary. The second reason for choosing novels over short stories and plays is connected to changes in the format of crime writing which occurred during the Golden Age period. At the end of the nineteenth century, in the time of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the short story was the most typical format for murder mysteries. However, as will be explained in 1.2.1, the more intricate plots and murder mysteries which emerged during the Golden Age demanded more space than was granted by the couple of pages typically covered by a short story, and so the novel became the predominate format in crime fiction. The novel form, like a number of other inventions of the Golden Age of crime fiction, remains characteristic of the detective genre to the present day.

## **The Setting: The Golden Age**

The beginning of the twentieth century saw a rapid rise in the popularity of genre fiction. The by then well-established adventure novel now tackled new, contemporary themes, especially that of “world-domination” with its “threat of chaos and disintegration of the world.” In addition, new genres started to compete with the adventure novel for readership. The most notable of these was the “mainstay of twentieth-century fiction”—the spy novel, written by authors such as Baroness Orczy (*The Scarlet Pimpernel*, 1905), Erskine Childers (*The Riddle of the Sands*, 1903), John Le Carré (*The Spy Who Came in from the Cold*, 1963), and Ian Fleming, the creator of the notorious James Bond (Carter and McRae 2001, 367).

However, while spy novels, thrillers and adventure stories were certainly popular at the time, no other genre reached such high levels of readership as the detective novel (368), and the era between the two world

wars is therefore labelled the Golden Age of crime fiction. Not only professional writers, but also various intellectuals, theologians, and many others, including C. Day-Lewis, T.S. Eliot and S. S. Van Dine, an expert on Nietzsche, tried their hands at writing crime fiction (Acocella 2010). Moreover, in the 1920s and 1930s various technological developments in the fields of publishing and advertising enabled the rapid printing and distribution of a large amount of cheap books to a rapidly growing reading public. New marketing strategies, such as the sale of books through book clubs or the publishing of books with special features (e.g. books with the last chapter sealed, in order not to reveal the mystery) were designed to further increase sales (Panek 1987, 120-121). But while these techniques did lead to an explosion in the readership of detective novels and a consequent dramatic rise in the number of novels written and published, some authors feared that the massive expansion would result in a general decrease in the quality of published stories, and thereby lead to the loss of the middle-brow status that the detective story had hitherto enjoyed (122).

In order to ensure the quality and purity of the genre, a number of influential writers formed a community which set itself the task of establishing rules for writing high-quality detective fiction. Golden Age detective fiction thereby ceased to be merely one of a number of popular fiction genres, but instead developed into a literary movement in its own right, with manifestoes, critics, and its own canon. All of these developments were embodied in the official organisation of Golden Age crime fiction, the Detection Club, founded in 1928 by Anthony Berkeley Cox. The Club united some of the most prominent crime authors of the era, including Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, the creator of the aristocratic sleuth Lord Peter Wimsey (*Murder Must Advertise*, 1933; *The Nine Tailors*, 1934), and religious figures-cum-authors such as the Roman Catholic priest Ronald Knox and the theologian G. K. Chesterton (Acocella 2010). These people worked together to establish a specific "code of ethics," which later came to be known as the Ten Commandments of crime fiction. These rules were meant to ensure that all stories written according to them met the standards of a "good" detective novel, but they also sought to guarantee that the author "played fair" with the reader, meaning that she or he provided all of the clues necessary for the reader to uncover the criminal themselves (Akersten 2010, 15).

Nevertheless, the Club did not only strictly enforce rules and determine which works were worthy of the status of a detective novel. On the contrary, the group was characterised by a certain playfulness and spirit of conviviality which is manifest in their collaborative efforts, such as *The Floating Admiral* ([1931] 2011), a novel to which each member

contributed one chapter (Panek 1987, 122). In other words, while the Detection Club writers took the detective genre extremely seriously and worked to set up strict rules, trace the history of the genre and protect its status as middlebrow fiction, they also understood the detective novel as a game, a puzzle (123). Furthermore, while these authors take great pains to establish that their works are true to life, filling the novels with references to real crimes and technical information from the field of criminology, the books are also full of allusions to other literary works and references to the writing process and to the fictional nature of the texts. This intermingling of the playful and serious and of the real and imaginary permeates Golden Age detective fiction (Panek 1987, 124, see also section 1.1.1).

It is also important to note that although classical or Golden Age detective fiction sprang from the roots planted by Edgar Allan Poe and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle in the nineteenth century, a number of changes and developments took place in this period. Firstly, classical authors abandoned the short story form in favour of the novel. This development brought about new challenges, and forced authors to look for new ways of revealing clues to the reader whilst concealing the solution over the course of an entire novel. As a response to this challenge, writers began to experiment with narration and point of view, often adopting the techniques of a third-person narrator or multiple narrators, which were first introduced into the crime genre by Wilkie Collins (Panek 1987, 131-132). Authors frequently borrowed elements from suspenseful genres such as the thriller to add pace and interest to their detective stories (135). Finally, another important trend observed during the Golden Age period was that of the rising dominance of women readers and authors, a development which led to a gradual feminisation of the genre and to repeated attempts to introduce a female detective to the genre (Panek 1987, 128, see also section 1.1.4).

Although, as LeRoy Panek put it, the Golden Age eventually ended after World War Two and the spotlight passed to thrillers and novels of suspense featuring “master criminals without sane motives loos[ing] mass destruction on humanity,” rather than a “murder at the garden party” (142), some of the developments of the era, such as the use of the novel form or the manipulation of points of view, have featured in crime fiction until the present day. Moreover, even today some authors work in the Golden Age style, creating novels which are now known as “cosy mysteries,” i.e. stories where the victim and the criminal are members of a close-knit group of friends or of a family, which suddenly becomes “too cozy for comfort” (Akersten 2010, 15).

The previous paragraphs have attempted to provide a very brief introduction to the topic of Agatha Christie and the Golden Age of detective fiction, and also to suggest the idea of food as a variable in crime fiction. All of these points are elaborated in further detail in the individual chapters. The text is organised into two main sections: the first and second chapter present the theoretical background, introduce main concepts and provide a brief overview of scholarly literature; while chapters three to five constitute the analysis of the novels itself. Lastly, the annex offers brief summaries of the plots of all of Christie's novels and lists publication information.

Chapter one is dedicated to classical detective fiction. The structure of the chapter is based on the structure of the classical detective formula, its individual sections corresponding to individual elements of the formula: the characters, the plot and the setting, respectively. In section 1.1, the focus is placed on the most crucial of all characters of the detective novel: the detective. Some general observations about the nature of the classical detective are made, however, it is emphasised that the Golden Age was also a period of change and development, the most prominent being the gradual feminisation, not only of the detective, but also of the formula as a whole. This process of feminisation is also explored in section 1.2, focusing on how intuition and abductive reasoning replaced rationality and deductive logic in investigation, and how bloody and physical murder replaced corruption or financial fraud as the crime of choice. Finally, in section 1.3, attention is focused on setting, especially on the shift from the urban settings typical of earlier detective stories towards rural and family settings that would later come to dominate the Golden Age period.

Chapter two introduces the relatively new field of food studies and overviews both classic writing on food and more recent contributions to the field. The organization of the chapter aims to reflect the interdisciplinary nature of the field of food studies by concentrating on one of its aspects in each section. Section 2.1 discusses anthropological approaches to food. Some of the first scholars to take up an interest in studying the role of food in society were anthropologists, and section 2.1 takes a look at classic works of authors such as Claude Lévi-Strauss, Marvin Harris and Roland Barthes. This section then goes on to explore the implications of these theories for present-day food anthropology and tries to pin down the main trends which define the discipline today. Section 2.2 takes a look at food history, exploring classic texts such as Louis Bourdeau's *Histoire de l'alimentation* (1894) in contrast with the works of contemporary historians such as Sidney Mintz, Wolfgang Schivelbusch and others.

Section 2.3 attempts to determine the position of food in philosophy, uncovering the bias against the physical and animalistic present in Western thought from the times of Ancient Greece and Rome until today, but also indicating the existence throughout this time of dissident philosophers who advocated non-conformist, hedonistic value systems. Lastly, section 2.4 examines food as a literary device and as a method in literary criticism, and studies the place of culinary writing within the realm of literature. A special section (2.4.1) is dedicated to the relationship between food and crime fiction, covering various topics including food porn, mystery cookbooks, or contemporary culinary detective novels.

The analytical section intends once again to reflect the basic elements of the classical detective formula as defined by Cawelti, namely characters, plot and setting, but this time introduces the element of food into the formula. Chapter three discusses how food serves to highlight various issues of identity in Christie's novels, namely class (3.1 and 3.2), gender (3.3 and 3.4) and nationality (3.5). The chapter concentrates on Christie's use of food to create stereotypical characters, but at the same time to mock or even disrupt established notions of femininity, Englishness, or the division between classes. Chapter four continues the exploration of the tension between the established and expected and the disruptive and transgressive, which permeates all of Christies novels, focusing on how food is employed in plotting and narration. The chapter takes a look at food and domesticity as methods of surveillance and control, rather than of passivity and oppression (4.1), at the role of feeling, senses and hedonism as alternatives to reasoning (4.2), and at the paradoxical relationship between food as a symbol of safety, care, and nourishment on the one hand, and of danger and death on the other (4.3)

The final chapter, chapter five, explores the connection between food and setting. Section 5.1 emphasises the importance of place in the detective novel and explains the interconnection between food and space. It discusses issues such as local foods, tradition, and foodscape. It also focuses on the division of spaces into public and private which dominates Western thought, and shows how this division relates to food; more specifically, how Christie used this division in order to manipulate gender stereotypes and to feminise the detective formula. Section 5.2 deals with food and time, and two concepts are highlighted in this section; firstly the ritualistic nature of eating and its relationship to the ritualistic nature of the crime novel, and, secondly, the connection between food, memory, nostalgia and nationalism in Agatha Christie's writing.

The introduction to this book began with three excerpts from different novels by Agatha Christie. These three excerpts, the first dealing with food

as an element defining Poirot's character, the second with food (or drink) as a murder weapon, and the third with food as a means of remembering and fixing events in time, succinctly illustrate the same points which will be dealt with in much more depth in the individual chapters of the analytical part of this book. They prove that food indeed permeates Christie's crime novels on a number of levels, and that it affects all of the elements of the classical detective formula. As such, they also show that this approach can be used to analyse the novels in their entirety from a different and hopefully enriching new perspective.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> such as in *The Secret of Chimneys* (277), *Cat Among the Pigeons* (186, 189), *Lord Edgware Dies* (127), *They Do It With Mirrors* (10)

<sup>2</sup> For a list of authors discussing this topic see the Bibliography or section 2.4.



## CHAPTER ONE

### THE DETECTIVE FORMULA

The belief that the detective novel is formulaic is a long established one. Tzvetan Todorov ([1966] 2008) maintains that while works of so-called highbrow literature are valued for their innovations and their ability to break with established conventions, popular literature, including detective fiction, is at its best when it most exactly fulfils the norms and requirements of its genre (227). Thomas Leitch (2002) also holds this view, claiming that originality is only valued in popular fiction if it helps to intensify the expected experience without altering it in any substantial way (63-64). P. D. James (2010) even considers the formulaic nature of the crime story to be the main element which differentiates the detective novel from other literary genres, claiming that “[a]lthough the detective story at its highest can also operate on the dangerous edge of things, it is differentiated both from mainstream fiction and from the generality of crime novels by a highly organised structure and recognised conventions” (15).

This chapter presents a discussion of various elements of the classical detective novel, specifically novels which were produced in the period labelled the Golden Age of detective fiction or which were produced by authors who started writing in this period and who remained faithful to the genre even beyond it. Although the above-delineated structuralist approach as advocated by Todorov and John G. Cawelti could be rejected as overly simplistic, it is assumed that this approach is highly appropriate for the study of the classical detective novel, as the appeal of the genre lies precisely in the way in which it restructures and ritualises reality. This simplification allows for the development of the clue-puzzle game which is played by the author and the reader, and also provides a feeling of catharsis which stems from the ritualistic isolation of guilt and its subsequent punishment.

Cawelti understands formula as consisting of the “conventional way of defining and developing a particular kind of situation or situations, a pattern of action or development of this situation, a certain group of characters and the relations between them, and a setting or type of setting

appropriate to the characters and the action” (1976, 80). The sections into which this chapter is divided correspond to these elements of a formula. Section 1.1 deals with characters, especially with the character of the detective, who is the main focus of a crime story. Section 1.2 discusses the crime and its investigation, i.e. the central situation and its development. Finally, section 1.3 explains the main functions of time and place in detective novels. The individual sections not only characterise the above elements and describe their development, but also observe and comment upon the two conflicting tendencies at play in each crime novel: the attempt to create a story which is as realistic as possible but which nonetheless respects the necessity of a ritualistic restructuring of reality.

## 1.1. The Detective

According to Cawelti there are four main groups of characters in a classical detective story: 1) the detective, 2) the criminal (or criminals), 3) the victim (or victims), and 4) the witnesses and/or suspects (1976, 91). However, while the portrayal of minor characters is often superficial and sketchy and their role is usually limited to a couple of pages, the detective’s presence is recurrent throughout the story or series of stories, and various nuances of her/his personality are described in great detail, if not always in depth (Giddey 1990, 62). Two other characters besides the detective are crucial to all crime stories—the victim and the criminal. However, despite their significance they can never become the main focus of the story. The character of the victim must not be described in any great depth, otherwise her/his death could arouse feelings of regret and pity and thus distract attention from the real purpose of a detective story: solving the mystery (Cawelti 1976, 91).

Similarly the criminal cannot take centre stage in the story, although for different reasons. If the readers “become too concerned with the motives of the criminal, his guilt is likely to seem increasingly ambiguous and difficult to define” (92). However, in a detective story “there must never be any serious question about either the specific guilt or the evil motive of these characters.” The criminal is not permitted to exist as a complex personality with virtues and vices and ambiguous motivations; they “must always be definable as bad” (ibid.). In other words, the only character to be fully delineated in a crime story is the detective, and therefore the focus of the story is placed solely on her/him. For this reason, crime authors take great care to make their own detectives stand out.

The importance of the detectives is such that they frequently assume the role of the author—their names are featured on book covers alongside that of the author, and it is their names, not the author's, which become familiar to the wide public (Giddey 1990, 63). This is also the case of Agatha Christie's two famous detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple: the books in which they feature are not labelled as Christie Mysteries, but instead as the Poirot Mysteries or the Marple Mysteries respectively, and the two detectives are of much greater interest to the readers than Christie herself. The following paragraphs examine this phenomenon more closely, concentrating on the special status of the detective, the notions of authorship, reality and fiction, the heroisation of the detective, and on morality and immorality in the crime genre. Moreover, they shed light on the gradual feminisation of the detective hero, which took place in the Golden Age of detective fiction.

### **1.1.1. Detective as Author: Hercule Poirot's Manuscript**

In his short study on joint authorship, Joachim Jung (1998) observes that “[t]he classical idea of authorship is that an author expresses his or her personality by producing novels, dramas or poems. The author imprints his style and personal taste on the phrases he assembles” (Jung 1998, 241). However, Jung contests this notion and argues that the idea of a “self-sufficient author is a mere fiction.” He quotes the German writer Reinhard Jahn who claims that an author is always “supported by friends, relatives, companions, publishers, editors” who provide inspiration, feedback, and guidance, and thereby suggests that the function of the author is that of “a mere catalyst who gives form to the numerous ideas, opinions, views, stories, and proposals he had received as material for his plot” (241). Through these insights, Jung wishes to further his thesis that cooperation between pairs (or even teams) of authors on a single literary work does not clash with the notion of creative expression. However, this section argues that the influence on the author does not have to come only from the outside, from real people and events, but also from within—from the writer's work itself. The style and character imprinted on a work of literature is no longer that of the author alone, but it also reflects the nature of the author's characters. The character of the detective occupies a very prominent role in the detective story and often continues this role over a series of connected stories; it is therefore highly likely that the character can become such a force and continuously influence the writing process. Thus in a detective story it is possible to witness a certain merging of two

worlds—the real, material world of the author and the fictional world of the characters created by her/him.

In defining a fictional world, Lisa Hager (2012) turns to Roland Barthes and claims it is possible to approach fiction in two ways: either as being passively reconstructed by a reader from clues prepared for her/him by the author, or as being open to a reader's active engagement, allowing for multiple readings, additions to, and reformations of the author's original message. These two types of texts are in Barthes's terminology labelled "readerly" and "writerly," respectively (1974, 4). Writerly texts, allowing infinite possibilities of reading, are the ones which make it possible for fictional characters to gain more dimensions and a wider range of choice in actions and thoughts, and thus become closer to the characters of the real world. Hager claims that Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes mysteries are examples of writerly texts. These stories contain endless amounts of "potential fictional worlds" to which the reader may "desire access": events which are hinted at but not described, past experiences which are not explained and future developments which are not mentioned. These "infinite points of entry into [the] fictional world" (Hager 2012) pave the way for a character to gain independence from the novels on whose pages she/he was born—such characters are no longer limited to what has been written about them. Instead, as a real person, the character now has a past, albeit one which remains unknown within the story itself and experiences not chronicled on the story's pages; by extension, it is also possible to suggest that the character has a future which continues beyond the end of the stories.

Returning to the case of Sherlock Holmes, Conan Doyle's creation is a perfect example of a character who surpassed the popularity of his creator, and at the same time grew independent of him, becoming a real person in the minds of his readers (or rather fans). Cathy Akers-Jordan observes that "[f]or years people called at No. 221B Baker Street, seeking advice from the famous consulting detective, not realizing that the address, like Holmes, was fictional" (1998, 5). Holmes established himself so firmly in the real world that not only readers, but also researchers and academics discuss the character as if he were an independent person. Hager notes that scholarly works on Sherlock Holmes discuss questions such as "Was his addiction to cocaine benign or harmful? Were his feelings for Irene Adler romantic or respectful? Were his origins British or American?" The publications of Holmes researchers collected in *The Baker Street Journal* "become a mix of scholarly articles and what may be termed fan fiction, including stories like 'My First Meeting with Sherlock Holmes' by Ellery Queen and 'Sherlock Holmes in the White House' by Roosevelt" (Hager

2012). In addition, crime authors also approach Holmes in this fashion, and make references to him in their own novels; they use the fictional character of Holmes as a means of confirming the reality of their own stories (Akers-Jordan 1998, 6). The character of Holmes is definitely established in the real world, and can now lend validity to other fictional worlds.

In summary, the character of Sherlock Holmes has gained independence from his author and blurs the borderlines between fiction and reality. However, the mysterious Ellery Queen, an American sleuth-cum-crime-author went one step further and succeeded in usurping the place of the author for himself. The authors of Ellery Queen, American writers Frederic Dannay and Manfred Lee, did not conform to traditional definitions of authorship as were described at the beginning of this chapter. Firstly, they worked as a team, and therefore their novels could not reflect the style or character of a single “genius author” (Jung 1998, 241). Moreover, they did not claim independence from their creation; on the contrary, the central conceit of their books was that the main character was himself the author, and the books were published under his name, itself a pseudonym of the real authors. “For ten years the authors concealed their real identity from the public” (243). Thus, the duo profited from what they considered a typical trait of detective fiction, i.e. that “[p]eople remembered the name of the sleuth but often forgot the name of the author. To give themselves a double shot at being remembered, they used the same name for both. Queen wasn’t just an amateur detective, he also was a successful writer of detective stories whose name was on the very book that you had in your hand” (Wheat 2005, 87).

However, Dannay and Lee did not draw the line at making Ellery Queen the author. They further deconstructed the fiction/reality boundary by making Queen an editor, establishing the *Ellery Queen’s Mystery Magazine*, in which short stories of other crime authors (belonging to the real world) were collected and published, chosen on the basis of “Ellery Queen’s taste” (Wheat 2005, 89). Thus, as with Sherlock Holmes, the fictional detective successfully entered the real world, merged with his authors, and, moreover, exercised influence over this real world by chronicling and evaluating the work of crime authors according to his standards, despite being a fictional character himself.

A similar merging of fiction and reality, as well as a tendency to identify the stories with the detective rather than with the author, can be observed in the work of Agatha Christie. For instance, the character of Ariadne Oliver—an amateur investigator and crime author who appeared in a number of novels such as the *Hallowe’en Party* or *Elephants Can*

*Remember*—has some affinities with the above-mentioned Ellery Queen. Oliver, like Queen, is involved in solving crimes and then writes about these experiences. Moreover, as Christie admitted herself, Oliver is a semi-autobiographical character, sharing not only personality traits, but also writing techniques and strategies with her creator. Like Christie, Oliver constantly wrote down ideas and made notes for her stories, and they also shared a taste for apples (Craig 2009). The crucial difference, however, lies in the fact that Oliver is only a secondary character in the novels, assisting detective Hercule Poirot in solving the crimes, and therefore she is never in a position to influence the development or outcome of the story.

Unlike Ariadne Oliver, Poirot and Miss Marple occupy such positions in the novels and it would indeed be possible for them to insinuate themselves into the world of reality and even to usurp the author's place. But while they both accomplished the former, neither was able to completely succeed in the latter, although there are some tendencies towards this in the case of Poirot. Christie herself encouraged Poirot and Marple's move to the realm of reality by making her characters older — both have a lot of past experience which could provide material for numerous potential fictional worlds. Readers are invited to speculate on the possible past lives of the two sleuths, and to imagine the cases which Poirot had solved as a member of the Belgian police force or the reasons why Miss Marple had ended up as a lonely old lady. In the case of Marple, Christie also left the possibilities open after the last novel, *Nemesis*, in which Marple inherits a considerable sum of money. This gives her the chance for a future life, which she acknowledges herself: "I'm going to spend it, you know. I'm going to have some fun with it" (*Nemesis* 238). In the case of Poirot, Christie limited the number of possible lives by ending the final novel, *Curtain*, with the death of the main character. However, Poirot's death only served as further proof that he had already become firmly established in the real world; on publication of *Curtain*, *The New York Times* printed a front page obituary announcing his death, which begun: "Hercule Poirot Is Dead: Hercule Poirot, a Belgian detective who became internationally famous, has died in England. His age was unknown. [...]" (*The New York Times*, 6 Aug. 1975, 73).

Christie's fans took the reality of Poirot and Marple for granted, writing letters to them with questions about their lives and background and asking Christie to arrange a meeting between the two sleuths (Mills and Waites 2008). Christie stated that such a meeting was impossible, but not on grounds of the incompatibility of the two central characters belonging to different fictional worlds: instead she pointed out that there would be a