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Landscapes of Murder: Exploring Geographies of Crime in the Novels of Agatha Christie

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Abstract

Mystery novels and literary geography have not often intersected. Crime fiction, for instance, has frequently been examined in terms of temporality, rather than in terms of spatiality. Todorov, in this respect, argues that crime narratives, in particular the clue-puzzle forms, are constructed on a temporal duality: the story of the crime – tells what really happened, and the story of the detective's investigation – the way the detective/narrator presents it to the reader. The two stories eventually converge when the sleuth unmasks the murderer (Todorov 1977).

The aim of this research is to read Agatha Christie's whodunit mysteries as centrally concerned with space, considering that, to quote Geoffrey Hartman, "to solve a crime in detective stories means to give it an exact location" (Hartman 2004). The study focuses on the spatial dimension of Agatha Christie's detective fiction, shedding a light on her domesticated milieus, both real and fictive. The first to be analysed is rural England, presenting both the narrations where the English country house – a Victorian or a Georgian mansion – functions as the only setting prevailing over the local geography, and her fictional villages, apparent idyllic paradises which in actual fact offer no refuge from the cruelties of the world. Similarly, the study takes into consideration the urban settings with a special attention devoted to the city of London which becomes the epitome of a privileged lifestyle. The city space appears as dangerous as the country side village.

Subsequently the research moves outside British borders, but within the confines of the enormous British Empire, with narratives set in foreign and exotic countries. The study analyses Christie's 'colonial' novels, where the Middle East is portrayed as a space of otherness. Lastly, the research investigates the train as a non-place, examining those narratives set in transit. All of these settings present an element in common, what has come to be called the closed circle of suspects. Whether in England or in the Middle East, the accent falls on the domestic sphere of the setting, which conveys the uncanny feeling that the murderer is 'one of us'.

Al mio papà
Non esiste nulla al mondo
che possa valere quanto tu vali per me

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Contents

List of Abbreviations

AB – *An Autobiography*
ABCM – *The ABC Murders*
ABH – *At Bertram's Hotel*
AWD – *Appointment with Death*
BL – *The Body in the Library*
CH – *Crooked House*
COT – *Cards on the Table*
CU – *Curtains. Poirot's Last Case*
DCAE – *Death Comes as the End*
DMF – *Dead Man's Folly*
DON – *Death on the Nile*
4.50 FP – *4.50 From Paddington*
LED – *Lord Edgware Dies*
MAS – *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*
MIM – *Murder in Mesopotamia*
MOE – *Murder on the Orient Express*
MRA – *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*
MU – *The Murder at the Vicarage*
TMC – *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*

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Introduction

This doctoral dissertation was born out of the idea of 'follow your passion'. It develops from my craze for the classic detective novel, the so-called whodunit. In particular, my 'addiction' to Agatha Christie's narratives – W.H. Auden called it an addiction like alcohol or tobacco – has pushed me to read again her best novels and focalise the attention on what Eudora Welty defines as the "lowlier angel" of a literary text. Moreover, the acquaintance with professor Eleonora Rao and her academic interests in literary geography have motivated me to consider Christie's novels from a spatial perspective.

The starting point of the research is the assumption that detective fiction is a genre where the concept of place serves a fundamental role. Solving a crime implicitly identifies the exact place where it was perpetrated. However, academic literary geography has often concentrated on high literature, leaving in the shadow the authors belonging to the so-called popular fiction. In *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*, David Glover and Scott McCracken observe that "popular fiction is frequently thought of as those books that everyone reads."[1] Furthermore, it is believed that popular literature offers cheap escapism and it has a highly lucrative purpose. The worldwide popularity of crime fiction makes it one of the biggest selling literary genres, but, at the same time, it is a genre excluded from the great canons of literature. Actually, until quite recently, the words Crime Genre and Academic Culture have been mutually exclusive.

In recent years, the genre has started to gain respectability and as a result the barriers between high and low literature have slowly started to weaken. As the new field of literary geography has fully developed and the spatial turn has

[1]David Glover & Scott McCracken, "Introduction", in *The Cambridge Companion to Popular Fiction*, eds. David Glover & Scott McCracken. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press 2012, p. 1.

invaded the humanities, in the last decades a growing number of scholars have examined the literary geography of detective fiction, from the classic detective-hero Sherlock Holmes (Tuan 1985) to the queen of the Golden Age Agatha Christie (McManis 1978). More recent contributions have intersected crime fiction with literary geography. In this regard, David Schimd has contributed a paper on the evolution of space in crime fiction (Schimd 2012) and more contemporary crime novels have been examined in terms of spatiality (Kadonaga 1999).

Mysteries and place are a necessary partnership. They constitute the key elements of every crime story, from Auguste Dupin's locked rooms (the smallest unit of space in crime fiction), to Sherlock Holmes and the fog of London and Miss Jane Marple and the fictitious village of St Mary Mead, gently rocking in her chair, busily knitting another fluffy garment. The research looks at classic detective fiction – Agatha Christie's whodunit – as a literary genre rich in spatial elements: the crime scene where the murder is committed and investigated represents the core of the narration. It is within the bounded space of the crime scene that Tzvetan Todorov's story of the crime comes to a conclusion and the second story, the story of the investigation, begins. The research aims at investigating the recurrent domesticated milieus within Agatha Christie's oeuvre: the country house, the rural village, the city of London, the Orient and the train compartment. Geography is fundamental in Christie's narratives, even when she did not intend it to be. Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, her best-known sleuths, eventually unmask the murderer thanks to a strong sense of orientation and a deep understanding of the geographical area. The reconstruction of the intricate movements of the characters through space and the knowledge of the exact location and distance between places are essential for the detective's own survival and victory. Although much has been studied and written about Agatha Christie, her geography of crime has not yet received much critical attention.

Chapter 1 offers a theoretical framework, analysing how geography and the humanities have intersected, giving life to what has been labelled as the spatial turn. From Foucault to Westphal, the chapter gives a panoramic view of the most influential works in the field of literary geography. Moreover, the

closing section of the chapter highlights how place has evolved in detective fiction, from Edgar Allan Poe's locked rooms to Agatha Christie's bounded places.

In chapter 2 I investigate a selection of Agatha Christie's novels set within the enclosed space of the English country house. Moving from *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* – her debut novel – the research takes into consideration other novels where the country house is so important to eclipse the town where it is located. I analyse *Dead Man's Folly* where Nasse House becomes the epitome of the crisis suffered by the English country house after the end of the First World War. The closing subsection is dedicated to *Crooked House* – the novel that satisfied the author the most. I analyse how the perception of the home as a safe harbour is violated, as home becomes a violent place to escape from.

Chapter 3 is divided into two sections: the first one is dedicated to Christie's most famous fictional village – St Mary Mead – whereas the latter examines how the city of London is shaped within her urban novels. Rural England comes to life in Agatha Christie's creation of St Mary Mead. The town – its real geographical position remains a mystery – serves as a background to Miss Marple's adventures, although some of her novels are set outside its borders. Starting from *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the research analyses how the town changes in later novels, in *The Body in the Library* and in *The Mirror Crack's from Side to Side*. For what concerns the city of London, the research has focused on two Poirot novels – *Lord Edgware Dies* and *Cards on the Table* – and on the only Miss Marple novel set in the city – *At Bertram's Hotel*. In the three selected novels, London is the emblem of a wealthy lifestyle. The events always unfold within luxurious apartments, suites and hotels while the real London – the majestic sights, the smog, the traffic, the crimes and so on – is completely excluded from the narration. The real metropolis vanishes together with its topographical landmarks.

The study of Christie's milieus continues in chapter 4, where I examine how she shapes the Middle East in those novels regarded as 'colonial'. *Death Comes as the End* functions as the starting point of the chapter. It is the only Christie's historical novel – she worked hard to gather all the information about ancient Egypt – set in a house of an ancient Egyptian kingdom, which recalls the

same structure of a typical country house. The research then discusses other 'eastern' novels, including *Death on the Nile*, *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *Appointment with Death*. Although those novels diverge in setting – from a cruise ship to a tourist camp – the author shapes places geographically isolated where the emphasis is on the bounded space of the narration.

The last setting to be considered is the train compartment. Chapter 5 sheds a light on two novels set in transit: *Murder on the Orient Express* and *4.50 from Paddington*. The former is a very famous Poirot novel set aboard the luxurious Simplon-Orient Express; the latter sees an elderly Miss Marple involved in a case of homicide occurred on a commuter train. The examination of the two selected novels reveals that trains offer Christie the possibility to better isolate her characters. Within the enclosed space of the compartment there is a small community of passengers recalling the party of family and friends usually found in country houses. The final chapter – the conclusions – points out the features these five settings have in common, gleaned from the analysis of her novels.

Chapter 1

Space, Place and Popular Narrative: Defining Place in Crime Fiction

Introduction

The following chapter proposes a theoretical framework focusing on those scholars and critics who have emphasised the connection between geography and literary studies. Moving from Foucault to Westphal, the chapter gives a panoramic view of the most influential works connected to the concepts of space and place. In the last subsection, the focus will be laid on the evolution of place in crime fiction: from Edgar Allan Poe's locked rooms to Agatha Christie's bounded settings.

1.1 The Spatial Turn

Chapter 1
Debora Sarnelli

The books on our shelves
are volumes of an enormous atlas
Peter Turchi

There is an underlying bond
which connects all the arts with place
Eudora Welty

Space serves a fundamental role in human experience. It has influenced human life since the dawn of time. The movements of the very first human ancestor living in Africa – not surprisingly considered the cradle of humanity – have proved the human's need and will to subjugate the Earth, to make 'home' those spaces still inhospitable and wild. The world as we know it today emerges out of the first diaspora of history: the wanderings of human's ancestors, who, starting from Africa, domesticated other continents. Life at the time was characterized by a profound dynamism. The tribes were mostly nomads and the surrounding space influenced the migratory rhythms. The cycle of the seasons and climatic events often made a place inhospitable, forcing humans to move in search of better spaces where to settle. The first humans, in fact, lived in close contact with the surrounding environment, taking from nature what was essential for their living, for the construction of shelters and the realization of wood and stone tools used for hunting. Therefore, the concept of community conceived as a stable physical place within whose boundaries lives an aggregation of people that shares the same rules and values, is quite recent. Those who live within the same physical and social space share values, rules and traditions, whereas the space beyond the borders is identified as other-space. The primitive forms of scattered population are followed by the appearance of the first stable settlements, when the first domestic spaces appear, where humans shape their own identity and, at the same time, become part of the collective identity.

According to the eminent Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, "space and place are basic components of the lived world"[2]: together with the temporal dimension they influence our daily experience. Every event occurs somewhere in space and time. Yi-Fu Tuan clearly differentiates between space and place. In *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* – an important contribution for the humanities – the geographer writes:

> 'Space' is more abstract than 'place'. What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with value […] The ideas 'space' and 'place' require each other for definition. From the security and stability of place we are aware of the openness, freedom, and threat of space.[3]

The distinction between the two dimensions depends on how human beings interact with both space and place and on the meanings they have given to both of them. Place embraces security and protection and it is created by human experience. As a consequence, place is space filled with meanings and values. Space, on the contrary, is a broad term which encompasses freedom and openness. Whereas place refers to the intimate, the known and the familiar, space is more connected to the unfamiliar. Space, however, can become place when it gains familiarity and meaning.

Literature is concerned with both concepts of space and place. A story, whether it deals with a real or a fictitious place, needs to happen somewhere. In this regard, the Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre has underlined that: "any search for space in literary texts will find it everywhere and in every guise: enclosed, described, projected, dreamt of, speculated about".[4] The very essence of fiction is its intimate connection with place because, as Sheila Hones has observed, fiction and location are inseparable.[5]

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[2] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis, MT: University of Minnesota Press 2001, p. 3.

[3] Ibidem, p. 6

[4] Henri Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell 1991, p. 15.

[5] Cfr. Sheila Hones, "Literary Geography: Setting and Narrative Space", *Social and Cultural Geography*, Volume 12. No. 7, 2011, p. 686.

In the essay "Mapping Literature: Towards a Geography of Fiction", Barbara Piatti has argued that every literary work consists of three separate components: characters, plot/timeline and place/space where the plot unfolds.[6] These three elements are fundamental for the success of a narrative. Presuming that one of them is missing, it is impossible to tell a story. However, whether characters and plot have been widely discussed and studied, place has always been an undervalued element of fiction. In her essay "Place in Fiction", the writer Eudora Welty admits that place has often been neglected and wrongly considered as "one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction"[7], whereas the other elements – such as characters and plot/time – detain a powerful role and relegate "place into the shade."[8] According to Eudora Welty, place "is the named, identified, concrete, exact and exciting and therefore credible […] gathering spot of all that has been felt"[9], and the starting point for every author. Welty discusses the vital connection between fiction and place and how a story would be a totally different story if occurred in another place. Hence, location "is the crossroads of circumstance, the providing ground of 'What happened? Who's here? Who's coming?'"[10]

However, space and place have often occupied a secondary position compared to time, a dimension which has received abundant critical attention till the first half of the twentieth century. The fascination of modernism towards temporality had undermined the concept of spatiality, following the theories of the French philosopher Henri Bergson on psychological time. From its oral forms to the written language, literature – to quote Ricardo Gullón – "has always acknowledged the temporal dimension on space."[11] The chiming of the Big Ben is a constant presence in Virginia Woolf's *Mrs Dalloway*, it accompanies the flow of Clarissa's secret thoughts and marks the partition of a single day in seconds,

[6] Barbara Piatti & al, "Mapping Literature: Towards a Geography of Fiction", in *Cartography and Art*, eds. William Cartwright, Georg Gartner and Antje Lehn. Berlin: Springer 2009, p. 179.
[7] Eudora Welty, "Place in Fiction", in *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews*. London, UK: Virago 1987 p. 116.
[8] Ibidem.
[9] Ibidem, p. 122.
[10] Ibidem, p. 118.
[11] Ricardo Gullón, "On Space in the Novel", *Critical Inquiry*, Volume 2. No. 1, 1975, p. 12.

minutes and hours. The reader follows her around the streets of London, from the flower shop to her house. Time is distorted and it is constantly flowing from present to past and to the future. It is the Big Ben which symbolises the passing of chronological time in the novel, whereas the characters' flow of consciousness embraces an inner psychological timepiece. The novel spans across one single day in the protagonist's life, demonstrating that the narrative does not focus on the chronological presentation of the events. The emphasis is on the consciousness of the characters. The narration conveys Clarissa and the other characters' movements through an intersection between space and time.

The Russian literary scholar Mikhail Bakhtin has been one of the first critics who has acknowledged the importance of the spatial dimension in literature. In his famous essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope", he writes that time and space are not divisible: there is no space without time and, consequently, there is no time without space. He has defined this connection between the temporal and the spatial dimension as chronotope, literally time-space, a term which "expresses the inseparability of space and time."[12] Bakhtin's essential assumption is that the events of a narrative text are always connected to a chronology-time, and that each narrative is constructed on the "intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships."[13] Time and space together constitute a fundamental unity in literature, representing two indicators which "are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole."[14] However, space has started to receive attention only in recent decades. It is the French philosopher Michel Foucault who has influenced a new series of critical studies about the spatial dimension of a literary text. At a conference "On Other Spaces" held in Paris in 1967, Foucault has introduced the assumption that whereas the nineteenth century was dominated by history and the modernist epoch privileged temporality, "the present epoch will perhaps be above all the

[12] Mikhail Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes Toward a Historical Poetics", in *Narrative Dynamics: Essays on Time, Plot, Closure and Frames*, ed. Brian Richardson. Columbus, OH: The Ohio State University Press 2002, p. 15.

[13] Ibidem.

[14] Ibidem.

epoch of space."[15] And Foucault did get it right. Spatiality has become a key concept in literary and cultural studies. As Edward Soja has declared in *Thirdspace*, "space was too important to be left only to the specialized spatial disciplines (Geography, Architecture, Urban Studies) […] The spatiality of human life […] infused every discipline and discourse."[16] The advent of this 'spatial turn' – as it has been called by Edward Soja – has been supported also by the work of the Marxist sociologist Henri Lefebvre. Foucault and Lefebvre – the main representatives of the discovery of space – are now regarded as the canonical precursors of the spatial turn. As a matter of fact, Edward Soja was inspired by both Foucault and Lefebvre in the proclamation of the spatial turn – a transdisciplinary phenomenon in the humanities – that he has categorised as "a response to a long standing ontological and epistemological bias that privileged time over space in all the human sciences, including spatial disciplines like geography and architecture."[17]

The concept of space is discussed by Lefebvre in his work *The Production of Space*. For the Marxist sociologist, space is neither a mere container nor a simple neutral frame in which historical events unfold. Space is a product of social praxis. Space is a social phenomenon which is constantly produced through the intersection of human experiences. In his influential 1989 study *Postmodern Geographies*, Soja takes inspiration from both Foucault and Lefebvre. The fact that the category of space has been ignored throughout the nineteenth century and during the first half of the twentieth century depends – according to Soja who here follows Lefebvre's theories – on the wrong perception of space conceived as a simple container of history: space denoted a static framework in which historical developments could happen. The new critical approach to space proposed by Foucault, Lefebvre and Soja overturns

[15] Michel Foucault, "Of Other Spaces", trans. by Jay Miskowiec, *Diacritics,* Volume 16. No. 1, Spring 1986, p. 22.
[16] Edward W. Soja, *Thirdspace: Journeys to Los Angeles and Other Real-and-Imagined Places*. Oxford, UK: Blackwell 1996, p. 47
[17] Edward W. Soja, "Taking Space Personally", in *The Spatial Turn: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, eds. Santa Arias and Barbara Warf. London, UK: Taylor and Francis 2008, p. 11.

the centuries-old submission of space to time in human sciences. Therefore, the category of space acquires a new renovated importance.

The spatial turn and the consequent spatiality of the postmodern era have been influenced by so many historical, political and economic dynamics that took place in the last century. The French literary critic Bertrand Westphal in *Geocriticism* has argued that this spatiotemporal revolution found the perfect breeding ground in the aftermath of 1945. The traumatic consequences of the totalitarian regimes and the difficult reconstruction of the societies after the end of the Second World War, led to the failure of the superiority of the temporal dimension, when "the concept of temporality that had dominated the pre-war period had lost much of its legitimacy."[18] The blind faith, Westphal writes, in "the stream of time had allowed an unwelcome guest: perverse progress"[19] which had driven the world towards the inhuman brutalities of the concentration camps and towards the devastating effects of the atomic bomb. At the end of the war, the concept of time was in crisis, deprived of the pivotal role it had detained among the human sciences. Time could not be trusted anymore.

Other historical causes must be taken into consideration. The disintegration of the Soviet Union and the end of the colonial empires have led to the establishment of new countries and, therefore, to the reshape of the geographical borders of entire nations. Furthermore, the effects of postcolonialism and the industrialization of several Third World countries have transformed the geographical spaces and the ways in which such spaces are perceived. The new postmodern era has also been characterized by massive movements of populations, refugees, exiles, explorers, travellers, which have rapidly increased the level of mobility in the world and, at the same time, have brought to flexible national borders. The twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century have seen large groups of people leaving their homes for different reasons. Wars, economic crisis, natural catastrophes together with

[18] Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism: Real and Fictional Spaces*, trans. by R. Tally. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2011, p. 14.
[19] Ibidem.

the pleasure of travelling around the world are only few of the motives of people's crossing and re-crossing borders. The ongoing movements of refugees-others coming from the poor peripheries of the world towards the industrialized western centres have amplified the sense of displacement typical of contemporary society. The postmodern epoch is characterised by a dual mobility: on one hand, there has been an imposed condition of exile due to political and economic exigencies and, on the other, a considerable increase in spontaneous mobility emerged as a result of low-cost air travel. This dual mobility has widely contributed to the erasure of the western notion of border together with the innovative technological developments that have suppressed distance, but at the same time have spread a new sense of displacement. Whereas in the nineteenth century life was improved by the steam engine, the telegraph and the railways, in the twentieth century it was the television and the telephone which changed life for the better; while nowadays the computer and, above all, internet have contributed to create a different spatial perception, erasing the traditional geographic borders. The time-space compression and the accelerated globalisation have increased the level of contact between people geographically separated, people who interact frequently with one another creating virtual bridges. The processes of globalisation have thus transformed the human experience of space and place and destroyed the spatial barriers to a point that, as Fredric Jameson notes, "our daily life, our psychic experiences, our cultural languages, are dominated by categories of space rather than by categories of time."[20] This passage from time to space – noted by Michel Foucault – can be read as the crisis of the dominant role detained by the western European culture.

The debate on spatiality held during the second half of the last century has deeply influenced literary studies and criticism. According to Robert Tally, spatiality has become a key figure in one's existential condition and in literature as well, since the reader navigates and explores the literary places constructed

[20] Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press 1991, p. 16.

by the writer. For the American critic, literature is a spatially act, as he writes in *Spatiality*:

> Offering its readers descriptions of places, situating them in a kind of imaginary space, and providing points of reference by which they can orient themselves and understand the world in which they live. Or maybe literature helps readers get a sense of the worlds in which others have lived, currently live, or will live in times to come. From a writer's perspective maybe literature provides a way of mapping the spaces encountered or imagined in the author's experience.[21]

Likewise, the correlation between literature and spatiality becomes a key topic in Peter Turchi's *Maps of Imagination*. The writer has argued that "to ask for a map is to say, 'Tell me a story'."[22] In a manner of speaking, the act of writing can be compared to the cartographic activity. The writer, according to Tally, is a literary cartographer and shares the same duty of a mapmaker; he/she must analyse the territory and choose what features to include in his/her narrative settings. The writer must also decide the shades to use to paint his/her own landscape and must determine if his/her own location should bear a resemblance to any real place in the geographical world.[23] Peter Turchi has noted that the writing process implicates two fundamental acts that intermingle with each other:

> One is the act of exploration […] This includes scribbling notes, considering potential scenes, lines, or images, inventing characters, even writing drafts […] If we persist, we discover our story (or poem, or novel) within the world of that story. The other act of writing we might call presentation. Applying knowledge, skill, and talent, we create a document meant to communicate with, and have an effect on, others. The purpose of a story or poem, unlike that of a diary, is not to record our experience but to create a

[21] Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality.* New York, NY: Routledge 2013, p. 2.

[22] Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*. San Antonio, TX: Trinity University Press 2004, p. 11.

[23] Cfr. Robert T. Tally Jr., *Spatiality,* cit., p. 45.

> context for, and to lead the reader on, a journey. That is to say, at some point we turn from the role of Explorer to take on that of Guide.[24]

The first act, which Turchi describes as the act of exploration, is the process of discovering; the second one is the act of presentation, the practice of communicating with others. Turchi considers writing as a combination of both processes. The way a writer leads a reader through the fictitious or real world of a story, a novel, or a poem does not differ from the way a mapmaker charts the physical world. In these ways, the writer is like the mapmaker.

The advent of the spatial turn following the Second World War has facilitated the alliance between literature and geography. For Bertrand Westphal, "it is doubtless unnecessary to point out the linkages between literature and geography [...] If it is in the nature of geography to probe the potential of human spaces, it is also in the nature of literature to touch on space, because all literature is in space."[25] Spatial setting is a fundamental component of every literary text together with the temporal dimension, the narrator, the characters and the events. Writing covers the space of the page and it evolves itself in a specific location. In this respect, the literary scholar Sheila Hones has declared that the novel – an ongoing spatial event – is a process happening through the interaction and the collaboration of multiple agents, including the author, the publishers, the text and the reader who co-operate in space and time.[26] Henceforth, the spatial event of the novel connects the multiple spatialities of the actors and erases the distance and the separating borders between author, text and reader. As a result, the reading process also becomes a spatial practice.

> The idea that the novel can be understood as a geographical event is based on the assumption that even the lone reader absorbed in a novel is engaging with space as the dimension of

[24] Peter Turchi, *Maps of the Imagination: The Writer as Cartographer*, cit., p. 12.
[25] Bertrand Westphal, *Geocriticism*, cit., p. 33.
[26] Cfr. Sheila Hones, *Literary Geographies: Narrative Space in Let the Great World Spin*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2014, pp. 6-7.

> difference and distance […] This means that "the lone reader" is never really alone: he or she is spatially connected not only to a story, to a book, and to a text, but also to a narrator, an author, and a multitude of other readers, known and unknown, present and absent, near and far.[27]

Every reader is spatially interrelated with other readers and they contribute together to the making of a literary text. The reader's response is fundamental in literature. In this regard, the theory of literary reception plays an important role. The author, the text and the reader are mutually involved/inter-coordinated in producing a text.

1.2 The Role of Place in Literature: The Case of the Detective Genre

Every place carries a story and there is no story without place. Literature, since its oral forms, narrates about events happening somewhere. Hence, literature has always dealt with the concept of place. Place is one of the three unities proposed by Aristotle in his *Poetics* – an action occurring in a single place – and it has fascinated story tellers since the dawn of time. Homer's epic tales about Ulysses' voyages around the Mediterranean emerge out of a spatial dimension. Ulysses – "the transgressive voyager"[28], as Harold Bloom labelled him – moves within unfamiliar places in his quest for a *nostos*, a Greek word for homecoming. The epic hero crosses and re-crosses borders to reach his home in Ithaca after the end of the Trojan war. Likewise, the antique world has seen the voyages of the Trojan hero Aeneas, who flees the burning city of Troy and his path will eventually culminate in the creation of Rome. Place in literature serves a vital function: it conducts the readers where the author intends them

[27] Sheila Hones, "Literary Geography: The Novel as a Spatial Event", in *Envisioning Landscape, Making Worlds: Geography and the Humanities*, eds. Stephen Daniels, Dydia DeLyser, J. Nicholas Entrikin, and Doug Richardson. London, UK: Routledge 2011, p. 247.

[28] Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon: The Book and School of the Ages*. New York, NY: The Berkley Publishing Group 1994, p. 81.

to be. Every human event happens somewhere, in the same way as every literary text shapes a story happening in one or in multiple places in which the events unfold.

Literature deals with two different types of places: a fictional place or a place of the real world. In many cases, novels and authors are tied to certain locations. James Joyce and the city of Dublin embody the most striking example: the Irish writer wrote the most famous evocation of his city in the modernist novel *Ulysses*. Although being geographically separated from Dublin – the writer intentionally emigrated – Joyce's engagement with the city encompassed his entire life. From his early work, *Dubliners*, to his last novel, *Finnegan's Wake*, Joyce shows a type of obsession with the city of his birth and childhood. In an interview with Frank Budgen, Joyce openly states the purpose of *Ulysses*.

> I want to give a picture of Dublin so complete that if the city one day suddenly disappeared from the earth, it could be reconstructed out of my book.[29]

In *Ulysses*, Joyce claims to present Dublin with great geographical accuracy. The city is conveyed through Leopold Bloom's wanderings around Dublin on 16 June 1904 that follow the precise geography of the physical space of the city. Besides the bond between Joyce and Dublin, literature is full of examples of how the connection between authors and their geographic area can become inseparable. Nineteenth century London comes to life in Charles Dickens's descriptions; the Brontë sisters wrote about the wild moors of Yorkshire; the Lake District has inspired Wordsworth's romantic poems; Jane Austen only wrote about England. Likewise, literature is rich in fictional places. Readers will remember the tiny exotic island where Robinson Crusoe finds shelter after the shipwreck, or the dangerous Skeleton Island in Robert Louis Stevenson's adventure novel *Treasure Island*. Gabriel García Márquez's fictional town of Macondo in his masterpiece *One Hundred Years of Solitude*, follows the rise of Macondo from a tiny village to a large city before being erased from the

[29] Frank Budgen, *James Joyce and the Making of Ulysses, and Other Writings*. Oxford, UK & New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1989.

map of the world by magical winds. Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* is a novel entirely about fictional cities. Tolkien's Minas Tirith is one of the most famous fictional cities among the fantasy genre, whereas William Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha is the fictional Mississippi county where the American author set his best-known fiction. Last but not least, the little village of St Mary Mead – created by Agatha Christie's pen – recalls several English villages but it is nowhere to be found on the map of England.

Detective fiction has often acknowledged the supremacy of the temporal dimension in organizing the events of the narration, considering that the essence of a detective story is to move backwards to piece together past mysteries. In fact, the detective must return constantly to unresolved past events in an attempt to reach the truth and unmask the culprit. Every mystery of a detective story can be understood only in relation to the past. In this respect, the genre has often been studied in terms of temporality rather than in terms of spatiality. In 1966, the Bulgarian-French critic Tzvetan Todorov in his famous essay *The Typology of Detective Fiction* has affirmed that the classic whodunit – the novel which became very popular during the Golden Age period between the two world wars – is built upon a temporal duality. The classic detective novel, he writes, "contains not one but two stories: the story of the crime and the story of the investigation."[30] For Todorov, the story of the crime presents the events as they happened (the Russian Formalists call it *fable*), whereas the story of the investigation is constructed on how the events are presented to the reader through clues and deductions (the Russian Formalists call it *subject*). Both the story of the crime and the story of the investigation have disparate status and narrate the events on separate timelines: the story of the crime presents the events as they happened in the present through a chronological order, while the story of the investigation focuses on the movements of the detective through time to disclose all the clues that lead to the final solution. There is no temporal overlap between the two stories since the story of the crime ends when the second story begins. The story of the

[30] Tzvetan Todorov, "Typology of Detective Fiction", in *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard. Oxford, UK: Basil Blackwell 1977, p. 44.

investigation occupies most of the narration and explains how the reader and the detective have come to know about the events of the first story. It is about the investigation and the revelation of the murderer. Everything that happens in this second story is linked to the crime of the first story. In fact, the story of the investigation works backwards to recreate the events of the story of the crime and discover the guilty party. According to Todorov, the events of the second story are of minor importance, since the story displays no genuine action and nothing happens to the main characters: a rule of the genre assumes the detective's immunity. The story of the investigation, Todorov argues, "has no importance in itself, which serves only as a mediator between the reader and the story of the crime."[31] The story of the investigation is crucial for the victory of the detective which marks the conclusion of the narrative. Detective fiction – to quote Franco Moretti – "is rooted in a sacrificial rite."[32] For the second story to commence a victim is indispensable.

Likewise, the connection between the detective genre and the temporal dimension has been analysed by Dennis Porter in his work *The Pursuit of Crime*. Porter has argued that the detective story is "a genre committed to an act of recovery, moving forward to move back."[33] The story is shaped around the gap between the crime and the final revelation of the guilty party. Porter describes this distance as a "logical-temporal gap between a crime and its solution."[34] Solutions are provided "only after significant delay" since suspense – a fundamental element of the detective genre – "depends on something not happening too fast."[35] Porter describes this narrative procedure as "backwards construction" maintaining that "detective novels are constructed backward and are made up of progressive and digressive elements for the purpose of

[31] Tzvetan Todorov, "Typology of Detective Fiction", cit., p. 46.

[32] Franco Moretti, "Clues", in *Signs Taken for Wonders: Essays in the Sociology of the Literary Form*s, trans. Susan Fischer, David Forgacs, David Miller. London, UK: NLB 1983, p. 137.

[33] Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Heaven, CT: Yale University Press 1981, p. 29.

[34] Ibidem, p. 31.

[35] Ibidem, p. 30.

producing suspense."[36] The pleasure of reading detective fiction lies in the possibility the reader has to discover the truth withheld by the author.

Just as the detective moves back in time to unmask the culprit, so she/he navigates the space of the narration looking for clues. Place is an essential ingredient in detective fiction. It delimits the space where the crime is committed, discovered and, in the end, solved. Every detective story deals with the concept of place since the solution of a crime implies the recognition of the very place where it was committed. As Geoffrey Hartman the literary theorist has argued, "to solve a crime in detective stories means to give it an exact location: to pinpoint not merely the murderer and his motives but also the very place, the room, the ingenious or brutal circumstances."[37] The smallest unit of space in detective fiction, as David Schmid has noted, is the locked room. It appears in Edgar Allan Poe's short-story *The Murders of the Rue Morgue*, which is generally taken to be the prototype for detective fiction. The short-story features the detective Auguste Dupin and the very first locked-room mystery of the genre. Two savagely murdered mother and daughter are found in an apartment along the rue Morgue, in Paris. The room seems locked from the inside: the windows are closed and fastened while the key is still in the lock on the inside. It seems that there is no way for the murderer to have entered or left the room where the murders were committed. With the locked room motif the figure of the armchair detective makes its debut. The armchair detective – usually an amateur detective – solves a crime without visiting the crime scene through a process of intellectual analysis. The first example of armchair detecting is another short-story written by Edgar Allan Poe.[38] In *The Mystery of Marie Roget* – where the author fictionalised the real story of the sudden disappearance and death of Mary Rogers in New York, transplanting it to Paris – Dupin never visits the crime scene. He solves the murder through the reading of several newspaper reports. The figure of the armchair detective will become

[36] Dennis Porter, *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction,* cit., p. 33.

[37] Geoffrey Hartman, "Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Story", in *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*, ed. Geoffrey Hartman and Daniel T. O'Hara. Edinburgh, UK: Edinburgh University Press 2004, p. 165.

[38] Cfr. John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*. London, UK and New York, NY: Routledge 2005, p. 21.

a constant feature in the crime genre. Miss Marple often solves crimes while sitting in her comfortable living-room and likewise the famous Nero Wolfe delegates all the investigation to his assistant Archie Goodwin. In the end, he ponders the information received and solves the crimes without leaving his house. The figure of Dupin appears again in one last short-story, *The Purloined Letter*, that together with the previous two is generally regarded as the first detective stories ever written. Stephen Knight adds to them two other Poe's short-stories *The Gold Bug* and *Thou Art the Man* where, however, the figure of Dupin is absent. Though Edgar Allan Poe never visited Paris, Dupin's tales are set in the French capital. According to John Scaggs, Poe's choice of setting depends on the fact that in France effective police officers were established before compared to London and New York.[39] In Paris, Dupin could baffle the official police in charge of the cases.

The locked room physically represents a spatial riddle. It emphasises the bounded space of a room that is in fact not locked feeding the detective's ingenious solutions. The finite space of the locked room delimits the space of the action and separates it from the outside world. Nowadays, the locked room still has a great appeal to the readers of detective fiction. The problem it presents seems insoluble. Something apparently inexplicable has happened. However, there must be a solution. The amateur detective – and not the official police – must prove how this hermetically sealed chamber is a mere illusion. What appears to be impossible, in the end becomes obvious. The solution the detective offers baffles the official police: impossible crimes cannot be impossible, because if they have happened they can also be solved.

Poe's experiment clearly influenced later writers, including Wilkie Collins and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. With Doyle, detective fiction reaches its apotheosis and becomes a genre of its own. Sherlock Holmes inherits some of Dupin's traits. As his predecessor, Holmes is a genius, is extravagant and likes avoiding people. Like Dupin, he shares his house with his only companion and friend, Dr Watson, the narrator of his adventures. They live together at 221B Baker Street, in London. From Poe's locked rooms, the genre evolves. Whereas Auguste

[39] John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 19.

Dupin is a static character – the armchair detective *par excellence* – Holmes is a dynamic hero. He is a great traveller and constantly moves within the vast British Empire. According to Yi-Fu Tuan, Holmes "could make himself roughly at home, whatever the social setting, in all countries of the world."[40] He feels at ease in Persia, Tibet, Switzerland but also in the unbounded space of multicultural London, the heart of the British Empire. Holmes moves among the dangerous dark alleys of the capital city with great confidence and, as Yi-Fu Tuan has asserted, "he is almost never disoriented."[41] As Holmes himself clarifies to Watson in the short-story "The Red-Headed League": "It is a hobby of mine to have an exact knowledge of London."[42]

During Queen Victoria's reign, London grew larger and larger. At that time, it was the biggest growing city but also the best expression of the dichotomies so typical of the Victorian era, outward respectability and inward lust. There was a respectable London, clean, bourgeois and conservative and a shadowy London, where vices and crimes occurred, threatening to disturb the surfaces of Victorian bourgeois life. Sherlock Holmes lived in a very dangerous Victorian London. In 1888, a year after the publication of the first Holmes' novella – *A Study in Scarlet* – Jack the Ripper, one of the most notorious serial killers in history, ravaged the impoverished Whitechapel district with a series of brutal homicides. Jack the Ripper's infamous deeds were not a unique and exceptional case. Crime was very common in the slums of London, where people dealt with prostitution, drug abuse and murder. Poverty and poor hygiene conditions increased the death rate. Poor people lived in inhuman conditions in cramped, dirty and squalid houses. Moreover, smog caused by the numerous factories weighed heavily on the city, creating a dark, dreary place. Therefore, the city was constantly surrounded by fog, even during daytime. Within the darkness of the fog theft, violence and murder could occur undisturbed. It is therefore no surprise that in nineteenth-century Victorian literature the fog plays a

[40] Yi-Fu Tuan, "The Landscapes of Sherlock Holmes", *Journal of Geography*, Volume 84. No.2, 1985, p. 57.
[41] Ibidem, p. 58.
[42] Arthur Conan Doyle, "The Red-Headed League", in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Stories.* Ware, UK: Wordsworth Editions 2006, pp. 460-61.

significant role. In Charles Dickens' London, the fog assumes the presence of a character, while in *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde*, Stevenson depicts a London that reinforces the dichotomies at the base of the plot – and of the main character. There is a respectable London embodied by the bourgeois Dr Jekyll and an obscure London, which comes to life in the character of Mr Hyde, Dr Jekyll's alter ego. Likewise, in the Holmes' adventures the two faces of Victorian London contribute to create a sense of danger and increase the suspense.

Victorians feared crime. When Conan Doyle gave life to Sherlock Holmes the reading public immediately liked the fictional detective. His massive success, according to Stephen Knight, "depended on the hero's power to assuage the anxieties of a respectable, London-based, middle-class audience."[43] Victorians liked the fact that Holmes successfully put the criminals behind bars. His stories reassured the reading public during a period when crimes where a daily occurrence and often remained unpunished. In this unmanageably large and complex London, Holmes could defeat the villains and protect the respectable middle-class. Among this urban chaos, his famous house in Baker Street denotes the only secure physical place. Within its bounded domestic space, Holmes and Watson find shelter and protection from the dangerous criminal outside world. The inseparable duo moves around the labyrinthine streets of London, travel within and outside the borders of the enormous British Empire but they are always able to return to their safe harbour in Baker Street. Hence, their house designates a neutral microcosm that mediates between the two conflicting worlds Holmes lives in: the civilized and decent London on one side, and the criminal and dangerous London on the other.

Although being generally related to the urban space of London, Sherlock Holmes has also hunted criminals in peripheral areas of the Empire, including the British country side. However, the primacy to have brought the crime genre back to the sealed space of the locked room belongs to Agatha Christie. In fact, with the publication of her debut novel in 1920, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Christie revolutionises the form, abandoning both the masculine heroism typical

[43] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*. London, UK: Macmillan 1980, p. 67.

of Sherlock Holmes and the urban space. With the advent of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction, the genre invades the rural areas and domestic spaces, places generally regarded as feminine. With Christie, the emphasis is laid again on the enclosed space and crime regresses from the outside to the inside. The events develop in peripheral areas where the characters are usually isolated from the outside world. Agatha Christie experiments new and ingenious ways of cutting off her characters, whether in a country house, a train, an aeroplane, a cruise ship or a private island. Her remote bounded settings are Poe's locked rooms translated onto a larger scale. The clue-puzzle tends towards the intimacy of the enclosed space. In fact, whereas with Sherlock Holmes the criminal is always an outsider, with Christie the murderer becomes 'one of us': everyone in the family circle can be the guilty party. Threats and disorder come from within and not from the outside world. The enclosed space increases the suspense at the base of the whodunit and at the same time delineates the place where the crime happens, is investigated and solved.

With the Golden Age whodunit, the rural geography becomes the most common setting, and it comes to denote isolation, domesticity and intimacy. However, the apparently quiet village and the ostensibly secure family house are disturbed by an out-of-place corpse. At the base of the whodunit there is a strong divergence between the peace of the setting and the brutality of the murder. The positioning of the corpse is completely out of place in these idyllic paradises. Its misplacement undermines the ideas of security and protection generally associated with the domestic space. Even the most isolated and harmless place contains instability and fragility. Agatha Christie masterly creates family houses and remote locales where family and friends gather together and are eventually involved in a crime. The detective – whose presence within the plot must reassure the readers – untangles the chaos, brings back stability and restores order. However, whereas Sherlock Holmes belongs to the social class he protects – although being an antisocial detective – Christie shapes a detective hero, Hercule Poirot, who is socially and geographically an outsider. His buffoonish exterior and foreign accent, as Stephen Knight has noted, separate him from the British society he assists. His flamboyant looks are too much for the English idea of gentleman. In fact, in several novels and short-

stories, the western characters fail to recognize him as a detective. His excessive manners, enormous moustache and small stature accentuate the gap between himself and the social class he defends. In *Murder in Mesopotamia* the narrative voice – the British nurse Amy Leatheran – is shocked by Poirot's foreignness. "I hadn't expected him to be quite as foreign as he was"[44], she writes in her report when he arrives at the archaeological house following Mrs Louise Leidner's mysterious death. Her scepticism towards Poirot is dictated by the fact that she has located him outside British culture and custom. The humour which surrounds the figure of Poirot alleviates the mood of the narration. Amy compares him to a "hairdresser in a comic play" (MIM, p. 94), thus accentuating his funny exterior which makes him a parody of the male myth. Moreover, the nurse Amy is disgusted by his broken English. As the representative of the British colonial Empire and of linguistic imperialism, Amy imposes her language and finds pleasure in correcting Poirot's many mistakes, "I felt pleased that I'd taught Doctor Poirot one English phrase correctly" (MIM, p. 202).

Equally, Poirot is also geographically an outsider. He comes from Belgium, but his constant movements in space – he travels around Europe and the Middle East – make him a cosmopolitan detective. "I belong to the world"[45], he says in *Murder on the Orient Express*. He moves from the centre – Great Britain – to the periphery of the Empire – Egypt, modern-day Iraq, Petra and so on. He also comes from a peripheral country within Europe he left during the First World War. Poirot's perpetual movements through space make it hard to locate him within physical territorial borders. He belongs neither here nor there. His expeditions across Britain and across the Empire occur not only in geographical terms, but also between the domestic domain – Great Britain – and the world perceived as other, between what is home and what is outside its walls. With the figure of Poirot Christie destabilises the Victorian craze of domesticity and the private which had emerged out of both colonialism and the fear of the

[44] Agatha Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2016, p. 97.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.
[45] Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*. New York, NY: Harper Paperbacks 1961, p. 67.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

other. Poirot, the parody of masculinity and the parody of Englishness, mediates between the periphery and the centre.

With the detective-outsider – an innovation for the crime genre – and with the shift of attention from outside to the domestic bounded space, the season of the domestic crime fiction begins. Whereas with the cosmopolitan Poirot Christie recreates the bounded space of the house in the most extravagant locales – the train compartment, the cruise ship, an airplane, a private island and so on – with the creation of Miss Marple, the rural sphere of life is given much more attention. Miss Marple is an insider, although her age and her status as a woman discriminate her. She barely crosses the town borders and most of her novels are set between its bounded space and some neighbouring rural towns. Thus, Poirot and Miss Marple do not share the same status – he is a foreigner whereas she is an insider. The two, however, share the same obsession towards domesticity. Hence, whereas with Poirot the domestic detective genre begins but then it adopts a foreign accent, it is with Miss Marple that it finds its most "rural" expressions.

Chapter 2

Domesticity and Spatiality: Mapping the Country House Murders

Introduction

The second chapter investigates Agatha Christie's country houses. It is divided into four sections. Section 2.1 functions as a brief introduction, showing how her approach to detective fiction and the consequent break from the previous male centred-genre led to a new geography of crime, away from those places generally regarded as masculine. The other sections consist of an analysis of those narratives where the English country house functions as the only setting prevailing over the local geography. The research will shed a light on the interior spaces of the house and, in conclusion, will focus on the house perceived as an unhomely place.

2.1 Agatha Christie's Gendered Detective Fiction: Towards a New Geography of Crime

How much more interesting it would be
if I could say that I always
longed to be a writer,
and was determined that someday
I would succeed, but, honestly,
such an idea never came into my head.
Agatha Christie - An Autobiography

When young Agatha started working on her first detective novel, the English readership was still deeply in love with the adventurous Sherlock Holmes. In 1917, in the middle of the First World War, Conan Doyle published a collection of short-stories, *His Last Bow* – already appeared on *The Strand* magazine. As the title itself suggests, the collection was initially conceived as the closing finale of the Holmes canon. However, due to the pressure of the readers, *His Last Bow* was followed by another collection of twelve short-stories, unified under the title of *The Notebook of Sherlock Holmes*. The same year Agatha Christie was working in a dispensary mixing poisons, scribbling down notes and ideas and shaping the outlines of a new sleuth.[46] A voluntary job she observed during the outbreak of the Great War, dispensing consisted of frequent slack periods and long lonely afternoons spent in boredom and monotony, with hardly anything to do but sit about. Therefore, the new job seemed to offer her a favourable opportunity to test her writing ability, when young Agatha found herself with a lot of inactive time at her disposal.

The idea of writing a detective story had always fascinated her since Madge's challenge, her elder sister, the intellectual of the Miller family, who had written, before marriage, several stories herself, many of which had been accepted for *Vanity Fair* magazine. Madge, addicted to detective stories, had initiated a teenage Agatha to her very first Sherlock Holmes story, *The Blue Carbuncle* (AB, p. 211) and, some years later, would have started her younger

[46] Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*. London, UK: HarperCollins Publishers 2001, p. 254. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

sister on her own mystery writing career. The two siblings often exchanged detective novels with each other, and they made a habit of discussing all the latest detective stories, reading with greediness all that could be easily labelled as a representative of the emerging genre (AB, p. 211).

The teasing challenge of writing an exciting detective story was raised by Madge a few years before the war, when Sherlock Holmes's popularity was at its height. Those were the years when hundreds of pseudo-detective stories had been flourishing all around the country, in the wake of Conan Doyle's enormous success. Writing detective fiction appeared to be manageable, a genre which could be easily practised by penniless writers. This explains why, during the years between the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries, an increasing number of people tested their ability to write a persuasive detective story. A few of them found discrete success and new fictional detectives appeared regularly in short-stories serialised in magazines, contributing to the expansion of British detective fiction. The overwhelming flourishing of detective stories was a result of the fascination people had with crime, which had become the perfect topic to exploit for entertainment purposes.

Things turned out differently for Christie. She was discussing with Madge detective stories they had read, when a young, unmarried Agatha confessed her desire to try her hand at writing one.

> 'I don't think you could do it,' said Madge. 'They are very difficult to do. I've thought about it.'
>
> 'I should like to try.'
>
> 'Well, I bet you couldn't,' said Madge.
>
> There the matter rested […] From that moment I was fired by the determination that I would write a detective story. It didn't go further than that. I didn't start to write it then, or plan it out; the seed had been sown. At the back of my mind, where the stories of the books I am going to write take their place long before the germination of the seed occurs, the idea had been planted: some day I would write a detective story. (AB, p. 211).

The time to beat this earlier challenge arrived and young Agatha, who had long been a fan of detective mysteries, started working on her debut novel

during the years of the First World War. It was the starting point of her life-long career as the major representative of the Golden Age of British detective fiction.

> I began considering what kind of detective story I could write. Since I was surrounded by poisons, perhaps it was natural that death by poisoning should be the method I selected […] There would naturally have to be a detective. At that date I was well steeped in the Sherlock Holmes tradition. So I considered detectives. Not like Sherlock Holmes, of course: I must invent one of my own […] (AB, p. 254).

To every young writer of that time who aimed at creating a new detective hero, Conan Doyle represented the main point of reference. His authority was truly a tangible sign. Sherlock Holmes had transformed this humble doctor into one of the wealthiest British men of letters of the Victorian epoch. He was the one who decided the price for a Holmes story and, back in 1902, he was knighted by King Edward VII. In the midst of his outstanding success, Sir Conan Doyle had become a national hero. However, Conan Doyle never accepted Holmes's popularity since it eclipsed what he considered his 'serious work'. Conan Doyle wanted to be remembered for his historical novels, but the reading audience became so fond of his hero that he was forced to resurrect him after the mortal battle with Professor Moriarty. The public demand for more Holmes adventures seemed endless.

Agatha Christie's debut novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, is littered with numerous traces of Conan Doyle's conventions. Thus, the young writer reveals how difficult it was, back in those days, to write mysteries without having in mind Britain's most famous sleuth. Writers in general learn their techniques from predecessors. In fact, the writing process before moving ahead constantly looks back, creating a strong and inevitable relationship between different writers and texts. Julia Kristeva calls it intertextuality, comparing the literary word to "a dialogue among several writings."[47] Kristeva's notion refers

[47] Julia Kristeva, "Word, Dialogue and Novel", in *Desire in Language: A Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art*, ed. L. S. Roudiez. New York, NY: Columbia University Press 1980, p. 65.

to the fact that the text is not a single entity but a heterogeneous combination of texts. Harold Bloom deeply analyses the concept of influence among authors in his famous thinking on *The Anxiety of Influence*. Although the American intellectual sheds a light merely on poetic influence, the study could be easily expanded to a wider field. One writer – he says about poets – "helps to form another"[48]: every new literary text originates mainly from old ones. Further into the text, Bloom argues that the primary struggle of the young poet – in our case the young novelist – is against the spectral presence of the old masters. The same applies to Agatha Christie, whose "first reaction to success was to copy it."[49] As a matter of fact, the relationship Poirot-Hastings-Japp "is essentially a replica of the relationship Holmes-Watson-Lestrade."[50] Undeniably, the young and inexperienced Christie and the elderly and unreachable Doyle were writing detective fiction simultaneously, and Hercule Poirot was born in the shadow of Sherlock Holmes. However, the triad Poirot-Hastings-Japp appears to a meticulous reader as not completely identical as the triangle offered by Doyle, particularly for what concerns the relationship Poirot-Hastings. Certainly, Dame Christie shaped Captain Arthur Hastings in accordance with the model of Sherlock Holmes's close associate Dr John H. Watson. They both function as the narrators of their companions' adventures and both have a military background. However, Christie's Hastings is less intelligent and more comic. Dr Watson, on the other hand, is both more erudite and astute. Watson is not a stupid man, as Holmes's frequent phrase demonstrates: "Excellent Watson! You are scintillating this evening". Hastings, on the contrary, is an absent and often blind sidekick, "and we get […] something of a benevolent tolerance by Poirot of Hastings's imbecilities."[51] When Christie realized she had absorbed more of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's writings than she had intended, elegantly removed Hastings in later novels. She banished him to Argentina and employed other

[48] Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence*. Oxford, UK; New York, NY: Oxford University Press 1997, p. 5.

[49] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*. London, UK: Fontana 1990, p. 21.

[50] Ibidem.

[51] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie,* cit., p. 21.

strategies and characters in the function of the narrator. Eventually, the two friends, Poirot and Hastings, meet again for the last time in *Curtain*, Poirot's last adventure.

> I was still writing in the Sherlock Holmes tradition—eccentric detective, stooge assistant, with a Lestrade-type Scotland Yard detective, Inspector Japp—and now I added a 'human foxhound,' Inspector Giraud, of the French police. (AB, p. 282)

The originality of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* with its anti-Holmesian hero was not soon appreciated and understood. The novel remained unread for almost four years. Agatha Christie found a publisher with some difficulty, and her debut novel was rejected three times.[52] It was eventually published in 1920, but it was a modest success.

> I sent it off to a publisher – Holder and Stoughton – who returned it. It was a plain refusal, with no frills on it. I was no surprised – I hadn't expected success – but I bundled it off to another publisher. (AB, p. 259)

The advent of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* caused a break from the 19th-century tradition of detective fiction, which had been characterized by male heroes whose masculinity was employed as their basic point of strength. Sherlock Holmes, for instance, was the god-like figure who could defeat every criminal. The milieu where he wandered was a reflection of his masculinity and was depicted as an exclusively male-ordered world, where there was no mitigating room for feminine qualities and virtues. Christie's debut novel, a considerable achievement for a first-time author, plays with two different layers of originality:

- The introduction of an anti-Holmesian detective hero
- A domesticated geographical setting

[52] Cfr. Jessica Mann, *Deadlier than the Male*. New York, NY: Macmillan 1981, p. 128.

I should like to present these topics point by point.

Hercule Poirot – Agatha Christie's most famous detective hero "of what later came to be termed the 'Golden Age' of detective fiction"[53] – rejected the masculinity of his predecessor, introducing himself as the first anti-heroic detective. "He is a parody of the male myth; his name implies his satirical status: he is a shortened Hercule and a *poirot* – a clown."[54] He is often described as a little man, and he is socially an outsider and 'the other', in the sense that he is a foreigner. He comes from outside the borders and is a Belgian refugee. From a geographical point of view, Belgium is slightly off the map of Europe. Undeniably, it is often mistaken for a French dominion, perhaps because of its official language and its small size compared to bigger neighbours such as France, Germany, and the Netherlands. It is also a country of cultural and ethnic hybridity in contrast to the idea of English pure national identity. Poirot, proud of his 'Belgiumness', is frequently believed to be a French gentleman. The impossibility to localise Belgium within the map of Europe generates a sense of uncanniness among Christie's characters. Poirot's social status as 'the other' together with his buffoonish exterior create that uniqueness Agatha Christie was looking for.

> Who could I have as a detective? […] Someone who hadn't been used before […] Then I remembered our Belgian refugees. We had quite a colony of Belgian refugees living in the parish of Tor[…] Why not make my detective a Belgian? How about a refugee police officer? A retired police officer […] Anyway I settled on a Belgian detective – he should have little grey cells of the mind – that was a good phrase: I must remember that – yes, he would have little grey cells. He would have rather a grand name […] How about calling my little man Hercules? He would be a small man – Hercules: a good name. His last name was more difficult. I don't know why I settled on the name Poirot. (AB, pp. 256 - 257)

[53] Victoria Stewart, "Defining Detective Fiction in Interwar Britain", *The Space Between: Literature and Culture 1914-1945*, Volume 9. No. 1, 2013, p. 102.

[54] Sally R. Munt, *Murder by the Book? Feminism and the Crime Novel*. London, UK: Routledge 1994, p. 8

The creation and the subsequent baptism of the Belgian detective evoked through the author's autobiography introduce Hercule Poirot as the reverse of the English and masculine Holmes. His detection has nothing to do with physical strength and virile charm, but it is based simply on his 'little grey cells' and his methods, as Stephen Knight has suggested, are feminine in their attention to domestic details. Poirot does not hide his "otherness". He introduces himself as a foreigner who "spoke English with a comic literalness"[55] and his odd and sometimes incompressible language – as the critic Stephen Knight has noted – together with his extravagant appearance and manners separate him "from the society he helps."[56] In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* – Agatha Christie's first successful novel – the narrator Dr Sheppard gives a ridiculous sketch of Poirot, a "strange little man" with "an egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense moustaches and a pair of watchful eyes"[57], who is comically throwing vegetable marrows over the garden wall. The detective's funny appearance and methods erase the gap between reader and detective. From a super-hero, the detective becomes an ordinary human being. Whereas Sherlock Holmes's extravagancies – including his use of drugs – and his immense mental capacity and linguistic skills keep him at distance from his readers, with the advent of Poirot and later with Miss Marple, the detective genre approaches the common readership. As a matter of fact, with Poirot's debut the Holmes-based qualities such as physical strength, bravery and vitality were gradually disappearing and a different hero-detective, more human and similar to ordinary people, including women, was making his way through the heart of the readers, becoming the new successor of the Holmesian detection legacy.

A unique character like Poirot, the anti-heroic detective with evident feminine qualities, required a domestic setting from which to operate. The foggy and dirty London back alleys were at odds with the delicateness of Poirot's

[55] Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*. London, UK: Eyre and Spottiswoode 1971, p. 166.
[56] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 118.
[57] Agatha Christie, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. London, UK: HarperCollins Publishers 2013, p. 19.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

detective methods, with his special attention towards domestic details and feminine practices such as the recurrent use of gossip. Moreover, his vulnerabilities and physical weaknesses established a familiar aura in the stories, which demanded a more domesticated field of action. The abandonment of the heroic masculinity, undeniably, narrows the distance between readers and the detective, no longer perceived as a mythical and invincible hero. "The loss of Holmesian confidence democratises the form and allows the puzzle genre to become something the reader is invited to enter on more equal terms."[58] The identification of the murderer becomes a do-it-yourself operation, a challenge between the detective and his readers. Hence, Dame Christie, in the wake of the radical changes she imposed to the genre, shifted the space of the action from the anonymous male city to the domesticated periphery, invading the marginal English villages forgotten by civilisation, "places conventionally demarcated as feminine"[59], where the readers could easily feel at ease.

In this brief chapter-introduction, the emphasis has been on preparing the ground for investigating and mapping Christie's most famous geographic milieus. It discussed her approach to detective fiction and the consequent break from the previous male-centred genre. The following sections and chapters will focus on the recurrent characteristic of her settings, both real and fictive, which I have discerned through my research. The study will shed light on five of her principal settings: the country house; the village; London; foreign and in transit; all of which present a precise point in common, what has come to be called 'the closed circle'. Their distinctive peculiarities have been gleaned as the result of the analysis of the texts I have selected for my study.

[58] Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave 2004, p. 19.
[59] Ibidem.

2.2 Englishness and the Country House: Agatha Christie's Contribution

> Of all the great things that the English have invented
> and made part of the credit of the national character,
> the most perfect, the most characteristic,
> the only one they have mastered completely
> in all its details, so that it becomes a compendious
> illustration of their social genius and their manners,
> is the well-appointed, well-administered,
> well-filled country house.
>
> *Henry James*[60]

The American novelist Henry James had a strong fascination with the British country house – he owned one, Lamb House, in the South of England – and applied his personal experiences to his novels, contributing to preserve the country house myth. Gardencourt, the stately home in *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881) and Newmarch in *The Sacred Fount* (1901) – to name just two – gave him the opportunity to play with the life of the people living within those premises.

The British country house has long been considered not only as a quintessentially English symbol, but also as the tangible emblem of national identity. For many centuries, it has dominated the English countryside, as a natural part of the landscape. The Oxford English Dictionary defines it as "a house in the country; especially in Britain a large one with extensive grounds or surrounding land, typically the residence of a wealthy or aristocratic family."[61] Mark Girouard defines them as "power houses – the houses of a ruling class […] the house of a squire who was like a little king in his village […] basically, people did not live in country houses unless they either possessed power or, by setting

[60] Henry James, *Collected Travel Writings: Great Britain and America*. New York, NY: Library of America 1993, p. 222.

[61] Country house (n.) In *Oxford English Dictionary Online*. Retrieved from http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.mmu.ac.uk

up in a country house, were making a bid to possess it."[62] The manor house was, indeed, a monument to power and wealth, where the landed gentry ruled over a region. As Mark Girouard comments in his anthology *A Country House Companion*, there has always been a never-ending myth surrounding both the English country houses and their owners who looked after their land and were true art connoisseurs whose galleries and libraries witnessed their passion for expensive pictures and rare books. The attractive myth of the country house has seduced several writers, gaining, therefore, its rightful place within the English literature. There is a great number of classics with houses as their title, *Mansfield Park*, or the country house Gothic *Northanger Abbey*, not to mention other fictional houses made so memorable that they are commonly believed to be real ones, such as Pemberley in *Pride and Prejudice*, home to Mr Darcy, and Thornfield in *Jane Eyre*, home to Mr Rochester and his troubled wife, Bertha Mason, who is kept confined in the residence's upper floor. The last representation of the country house in literature is found in the Golden Age detective fiction. As the Marxist critic Raymond Williams has observed – he was worried about the hierarchies of class associated with the country house – "the true fate of the country-house novel was its evolution into the middle class detective story."[63] The fascination about the myth surrounding the manor house found its last expression in the clue-puzzle genre, when "the symbolic status of the country house […] came to be intertwined with the symbolic status of Christie's work."[64] Therefore, the classic inter-war whodunit led by Dame Christie has become the witness of the logical conclusion of the country house myth. The inter-war period was a time of dramatic change for the British country-houses, "a period of gentle decline in which the sun set slowly on the British Empire and the shadows lengthened on the lawns of a thousand stately

[62] Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House: A Social and Architectural History*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1978, p. 2.
[63] Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City*. London, UK: The Hogarth Press 1985, p. 249
[64] Stuart Barnett, "A Fitting End: The Country House, Agatha Christie and *Dead Man's Folly*", *Clues A Journal of Detection,* Volume 34. No 1, Spring 2016, p. 64.

homes across the nation."[65] One by one the ancient homes of England were demolished or sold off. Fewer and fewer landowners could afford to run such great houses due to the increased taxation. Moreover, the negative effects of the First World War – in particular the premature loss of many male heirs – forced numerous country house owners to abandon and sell their historic residences. Christie's oeuvre retraces the sad destiny of the British country house. In this regard, the most iconic of her fictional country houses suffer the same social and historical threats of the inter-war epoch, and, as a matter of fact, they feature quite often in her novels. Christie truly adored England and all things English, and the country house was, undoubtedly, one of them. As Earl Bargainnier asserts, "Christie's favourite setting is the country house."[66] It is not accidental that she has been rightly portrayed as the "country house's great eulogist."[67]

The Mysterious Affair at Styles fixes and confines the geography of crime within the bounded space of an English country house. The fictional country house of the novel is called Styles Court. The 20th century reader, accustomed to Doyle's sinister descriptions of rural country places, was soon deceived by the beauty and the elegance of Christie's manor house. Whereas in Sherlock Holmes's rural cases the scene was described as disturbing and menacing, in Agatha Christie the peripheral countryside is first portrayed as a known and familiar place and subsequently deprived of its intimate function. In this regard, the geographer Yi-Fu Tuan has observed that those Sherlock Holmes's stories set in rural landscapes outside the rational space of the city are often accompanied by sinister descriptions.[68] No criminal deeds were perpetrated when the scene and the setting were described in a neutral language. Nature was usually devastated by storms, wind and blizzards when something

[65] Adrian Tinniswood, *The Long Weekend: Life in the English Country House Between the Wars*. London, UK: Jonathan Cape 2016, p. IX

[66] Earl Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder: The Fiction of Agatha Christie*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green University Popular Press 1980, p. 28

[67] Stuart Barnett, "A Fitting End: The Country House, Agatha Christie and *Dead Man's Folly*", cit., p. 63.

[68] Cfr. Yi-Fu Tuan, "The Landscapes of Sherlock Holmes", cit., p. 58.

dangerous was about to occur. On the contrary, in Agatha Christie's whodunits there is always an aura of domesticity and tranquillity which pervades her narrations. Hence, whereas Holmes's world is better epitomised by rain and grey clouds, Christie's fictional world is made of sunny landscapes and flowery gardens.

The country house of Styles Court makes its way among Christie's fictional country houses in the novel the author wrote during the First World War. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the narrator, a young and injured Arthur Hastings on sick leave from the Front, introduces the reader to the geographical setting, giving a very brief description of what kind of place Styles Court is, namely the manor house of the little town of Styles St Mary. This is one of the few Christie's country house novels fixed in space: the story is set in Essex, during the First World War.

> I descended from the train at Styles St. Mary, an absurd little station […] perched up in the midst of green fields and country lanes […] The village of Styles St. Mary was situated about two miles from the little station, and Styles Court lay a mile the other side of it.[69]

In Hastings's recollection, no elements foreshadow the imminent tragedy. On the contrary, the first-person narrator informs the readers that he has often stayed at Styles Court during his youth, showing the familiarity he has with this large and isolated place. The remoteness of Styles Court from the war and the rest of the world highlights the sense of intimacy Hastings associates to the house. In the middle of the green English fields surrounding the estate, the reader is pervaded by the comfortable feeling that nothing horrible can occur, that the world with its evilness has been shut outside.

> As one looked out over the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost impossible to believe that, not so far away, a great war was running its

[69] Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Agatha Christie Omnibus 1920s – Volume One. London, UK: HarperCollins Publishers 1995, p. 5.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

> appointed course. I felt I had suddenly strayed into another world.
> (MAS, p. 5)

Hastings has returned to Styles Court to find shelter and safety. The reader detects the sense of protection felt by the narrator while contemplating the countryside. The war with its atrocities now seems far away, and Styles Court appears to his eyes as a safe harbour, a quite unattached microcosm where social stability and security have been preserved. As Robin Woods points out, Styles Court is "a fortress against the foreign engagements that the war presented and, more important, against the advancing forces of time."[70] The feeling of protection the narrator perceives is revealed as a mere illusion when the matriarch of Styles Court is poisoned. From a secure place, the house becomes a place to escape from.

Christie does not give a description of the fictitious town of Styles St Mary – there is always a halo of mystery concerning the exact geographical location of her towns. The novel is both rooted in a particular real-world geography (the county of Essex), and creates fictional topographies (the town of Styles St Mary). As it happens in her other novels featuring a manor house, the country house is so important to eclipse the fictional village in which the house is placed. The similarity between the name of the country house – Styles Court – and the name of the village – Styles St Mary – reveals the strong relationship between the two: the village predates the house which, with the appropriation of the place name, clarifies its role within the community space as the holder of power. Strictly speaking, the country house is named after the village because it controls the village. The name Christie has chosen for the town, Styles St Mary, conceals several socio-historical connotations of that specific period. It reveals the dependency of the English villages on both the gentry (the owners of the manor house, in this case Styles Court) and on churches (the church probably called St Mary). The manor house on one hand and the church on the other had strong connotations of power and the entire village was obedient and subjected to

[70] Robin Woods, "It Was the Mark of Cain: Agatha Christie and the Murder of the Mystery", in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, eds. Jerome H. Delamater & Ruth Prigozy. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press 1997, p. 105.

their rules. The gentry controlled the village economy – they tended their lands – while the church regulated almost every aspect of people's life, in particular it controlled their moral conduct. The great respect the villagers have towards the occupants of the country house permeates the pages of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. In one scene, during the inquest for Emily Inglethorp's murder, the chemist's assistant is called to give his evidence. He has sold a poison, the strychnine, over the counter to a member of the manor family. He apologises for this irreparable mistake and he confesses that he saw "no harm" in it, considering that the buyer was a respectable member of "the Hall". (MAS, p. 89). The chemist's behaviour is just a symptom of the villagers' habit of endeavouring to please "the Hall".

The destiny of Styles Court is tied to the figure of Hercule Poirot. His entire fictional career starts and finishes within the bounded space of this magnificent place. Christie, indeed, revisited the country house of Styles Court in the last novel featuring the Belgian detective: *Curtain*, which was published just before her death. Years have gone by; hundreds of murderers have been brought to justice and Poirot's popularity has crossed time and space. But the inexorable passing of time does not even spare the invincible Poirot, who, in the battle against aging, must pay the highest price. *Curtain* was written during the Second World War, but Christie kept the manuscript in a safe for over thirty years so that it was available for publication at her death. Eventually Poirot's last case was published in 1975 since the author "changed her mind and allowed the publication before her death, which followed only about three months later."[71] As Janet Morgan explains in her biography, Christie wanted to have novels in reserve in case "she found herself unable to work"[72] in later years. This authorial strategy was used again with *Sleeping Murder*, the last Miss Marple novel, published posthumously, but written, like *Curtain*, during the 1940s. It is widely known that Christie grew to dislike Poirot intensely (Doyle as well hated his own creation); she really wanted to end his life. However, her publishers and her

[71] Russel H. Fitzgibbon, *The Agatha Christie Companion*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press 2005, p. 45.
[72] Janet Morgan, *Agatha Christie*. New York, NY: Harper 1984, p. 230.

millions of fans all over the world forced her to keep writing about his adventures.[73] Killing him off in *Curtain* and writing about his death became a bittersweet consolation for the author. The best place where to do it was the country house which saw his rise as a detective.

In *Curtain*, the country house of Styles Court has nothing resembling its original appearance. The magnificent estate has been sold to the Luttrells who have transformed it into a genteel guest house, sharing the same destiny of many of the grandest English estates. As Captain Hastings comments:

> Changes – changes everywhere. But *one* thing, strangely enough, was the same. I was going to Styles to meet Hercule Poirot.[74]

The story of their friendship starts and ends in the same place, so that the first and the last Poirot's novel(s) create a circular narrative structure, fixing the story in Essex at Styles Court, as time has stopped there. But time has passed, imposing its signs on the pretty village of Styles St Mary and on its manor house, leaving untouched only the little station.

> At this point my meditation were interrupted by the train drawing up at the station of Styles St. Mary. That at least had no changed. Time had passed it by. It was still perched in the midst of fields, with apparently no reason for existence. As my taxi passed through the village, though, I realized the passage of years. Styles St. Mary was altered out of all recognition. Petrol station, a cinema, two more inns and rows of council houses. (CU, p. 10)

The wave of modernisation and progress has contaminated the little village of Styles St Mary and Hastings can do nothing but notice the evident additions to the isolated village: a cinema, a petrol station and several council houses, a type of social and affordable housing which tends to be associated

[73] Cfr. Marty S. Knepper, "The Curtain Falls: Agatha Christie's Last Novels", *Clues*, Volume 23. No. 4, Summer 2005, p. 70.

[74] Agatha Christie, *Curtain. Poirot's Last Case*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2002, p. 7
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

with urban rather than rural space. This vision foreshadows the heavy changes time inflicted upon the country house of Styles Court.

> We turned in at the gate of Styles. Here we seemed to recede again from modern times. The park was much as I remembered it, but the drive was badly kept and much overgrown with weeds growing up over the gravel. (CU, p. 10)

Styles Court has changed a lot since Poirot's and Hastings' first visit. The great elegance of the property once belonged to the Cavendish family has faded away. The weeds growing wildly over the gate of the park testified the state of deterioration and neglect in which the country house was, and, moreover, the financial difficulties of the new owners. The passing of time has not even spared the interior of the place, furnished in a cheap modern style. The grounds are ill-kept and the once spacious rooms partitioned and furnished in the worst ways. Even the food is not as delicious as the it used to be. The coffee is undrinkable and the food uneatable. The grandiosity of the country house of Styles Court has now completely vanished and with it, that of thousands of manor houses all over Britain, revealing an important aspect of the changing socio-historical period: the decline of aristocracy.

The abandonment and the consequent deterioration of the country house as a symbol of national identity affected Christie's narratives geographically set within the bounded space of a country house. She occasionally revisited one depicted in a previous novel, as she did in *Curtain*, to be the testimony and to document the vast economic and social vicissitudes suffered by the country house during the 20th century. Styles Court, in fact, is not the only country house to appear twice in her oeuvre. Gossington Hall shares the same fate. It is the manor house where the corpse of a blond girl is found in the 1942 novel *The Body in the Library* and, twenty years later, the author employs the same house as the main setting in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. According to Stuart Barnett, Gossington Hall represents Miss Marple's Styles Court, because two of her adventures revolve around this country house. Gossington Hall is a Victorian mansion located in the fictional village of St Mary Mead, home to the spinster

Miss Marple. The owners, the retired Colonel Arthur Bantry and his wife Dolly, weak up one morning to find the dead body of a young girl downstairs on the floor of their library. It is a shocking discovery which introduces a restricted place within another restricted place: the library, which corresponds to a sort of Golden Age version of Edgar Allan Poe's locked room.

The Second World War has passed, several years have gone by and the country house of Gossington Hall is given a new life in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. Whereas in *The Body in the Library* a series of incidents lead to the abandonment of a corpse within the library of the estate, in the later novel *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* the house becomes the locus of the actual murder. As in *Curtain*, the halo of change permeates the narration.

> One had to face the fact: St Mary Mead was not the place it had been. In a sense, of course, nothing was what it had been. You could blame the war (both the wars) or the younger generation, or women going out to work, or the atom bomb or just the Government – but what one really meant was the simple fact that one was growing old. [75]

The changes in the appearance of the village are the same encountered by Hastings after his arrival at the little station of Styles St Mary. Modernisation has drastically altered the idyllic English village. Those changes parallel the ones in the country house of Gossington Hall. Colonel Arthur Bantry and his wife Dolly are no longer the owners. The couple was an active part of the village life, however, after the colonel's death, Dolly was forced to sell Gossington Hall to people who are outsiders within the village community: they are Hollywood stars.

> Gossington Hall itself had changed hands once or twice. It had been run as a guest house, failed, and been bought by four people who had shared it as four roughly divided flats and subsequently quarrelled. Finally the Ministry of Health had bought it for some

[75] Agatha Christie, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2016, p. 3. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

> obscure purpose for which eventually did not want it. The Ministry had now resold it. (TMC p. 23)

Modernisation and progress have eventually come and swept away the grandiosity of Gossington Hall, the emblem of an era which is rapidly coming to an end. An institution in the life of St Mary Mead, Gossington Hall struggles to find its position within the contemporary world. It has undergone different transformations, has changed hands many times, reflecting the sad destiny of those country houses which had to adapt to the exigencies of the period just to survive.

Agatha Christie's most severe example of the crisis and decline of the English country house remains *Dead Man's Folly*, published in 1956. The setting of the story is Nasse House, a big white Georgian mansion shaped on Christie's own country house of Greenway purchased in 1939 together with her second husband Max Mallowan, usually regarded as her favourite residence.[76] In her *Autobiography,* she portrays Greenway as "a white Georgian house of about 1780 or 90, with woods sweeping down to the Dart below, and a lot of fine shrubs and trees – the ideal house, a dream house. The loveliest place in the world" (AB, p. 480). Nasse House is geographically situated in the county of Devon, near the fictitious village of Nassecomb. As it has been the case with the country house of Styles Court and the town of Styles St Mary where it is located, the similarity between the name of Nasse House and the name of the village of Nassecomb reveals how the country house has extended its ruling authority within the community space through the appropriation of the place name. Nasse House is surrounded by the country of Dartmoor and, in the zone where the river Helm meets the English Channel, there is the town of Helmmouth. As it happens in the other country house novels, there are no detailed descriptions of Nasse House, as Christie never dulls her narratives with excessive decorative details of the houses. She provides the reader just with the necessary spatial information to localise the guilty party. Nasse House is said to be "a gracious

[76] Cfr. James Zemboy, *The Detective Novels of Agatha Christie. A Reader's Guide*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Co Publishers 2008, p. 294

house, beautifully proportioned"[77], with its white exterior contrasting with the green of the surrounding hills and the immense garden, with its winding paths through the wood, bordered with magnolias and rhododendrons. What the readers perceive while reading about Nasse House, it is the sense of largeness of the property which covers sixty-five acres of land, including a farm where the tenant family lives, a boathouse built on the fictional river Helm and a lodge, which no longer functions as a real lodge – it was once the place designated to the gatekeeper, who controlled the entrance to the property. It has, indeed, been modernised (like Gossington Hall) and occupied by the former mistress of the house, Mrs Amy Folliat. The passage of the property from Mrs Folliat to the Stubbs, the current owners, symptomises the decline of the landed gentry and the consequent disappearance of the country house from the map of England. In the novel, several characters note that there have always been Folliats at Nasse House. Unfortunately, the two world wars have changed too many things, and together with heavy taxations, a diminishing income and the loss of two sons during the world conflict, have forced Mrs Folliat to sell the property which had belonged to her family for generations. She is the last representative of an illustrious lineage, whose roots date back to the Elizabethan era, when the first Folliat of Nasse House had been Sir Gervase Folliat, a contemporary of Sir Francis Drake, who had sailed with him in his voyage to the new world.

To celebrate the new life given to Nasse House, the current owners organize an afternoon fête, precisely a Murder Hunt, and invite the entire village to participate. The event, which becomes the centre of the narration, functions as a social debut of the new owners, seen by the villagers as the saviours of Nasse House, having spared it from destruction and from being transformed into a school or a guest house.

> It is sad, the toll token by the war. Young men killed in battle – death duties and all that. Then whoever comes into a place can't afford to keep it up and has to sell (DMF, p. 151).

[77] Agatha Christie, *Dead Man's Folly*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2012, p. 15.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

"Everyone is quite conscious of the preceding period of instability when the fate of Nasse House was uncertain"[78] and everyone in the village seemed worried about its destiny. A neighbouring country house, Hoodown Park, for instance, had lost its grandiosity. Due to heavy taxations, its owners had to sell it. Having lost its role as a family house, it had to be transmuted into a Youth Hostel. Nobody wants Nasse House to suffer such a wrong. Mrs Folliat, the previous mistress of the estate, is glad to see that the new Nasse House has not changed from the her old Nasse House.

> "Since Nasse had to be sold", said Mrs Folliat, with a fain tremor in her voice, "I am glad that sir George bought it. It was requisitioned during the war by the Army and afterwards it might have been bought and made into a Guest House or a school, the rooms cut up and partitioned, distorted out of their natural beauty. Our neighbours, the Fletchers, at Hoodown, had to sell their place and it is now a Youth Hostel." (DMF, p. 54)

Amy Folliat is very grateful towards the Stubbs who have saved Nasse House from a sad destiny. Although she has lost the role of the matriarch, Amy is glad to see that her old residence still occupies a prominent position within the community space. Moreover, she is gratified that Nasse House, after a period of uncertainty, has regained its antique role of family home. The entire community shares her same feelings of joy about the rediscovered magnificence of Nasse House, and everyone acts as if the house were still Amy's.

> Nice to have Nasse lived in again. We were all so afraid it was going to be a hotel. You know what it is nowadays; one drives through the country and passes place after place with the board up "Guest House" or "Private Hotel" or "Hotel AA Fully Licensed". All the houses one stayed in as a girl – or where one went to dances. Very sad, I'm glad about Nasse and so is poor Amy Folliat, of course. (DMF, p. 67).

[78] Stuart Barnett, "A Fitting End: The Country House, Agatha Christie and Dead Man's Folly", cit., p. 66.

Villagers joining the afternoon fête are delighted to see that Nasse House has preserved its original beauty and that its vital role within the village has remained untouched. Yet, although George Stubbs, the wealthy man who has purchased the estate, does not belong to the traditional English landed gentry and does not have a memorable lineage like Amy Folliat, everyone agrees that his arrival has saved Nasse House from destruction. However, throughout the narration his presence is continuously shadowed by the figure of Amy Folliat who was and still is, to the villagers' eyes, the one and only mistress of Nasse House: "She was, very definitely this afternoon, Mrs Folliat of Nasse House" (DMF, p. 78). Amy Folliat personifies the refusal of the landed gentry to hand over their ruling role and, as a consequence, their family estates to outsiders belonging to a new wealthy social class.

Christie's fiction focuses on the country house during a time when this very English institution is suffering a deep crisis. Many of the houses she had encountered during her life had lost their role as family homes: Ashfield the house of her childhood in Torquay was demolished; Marple Hall became and still is a comprehensive school; Abney Hall, home to her sister Madge and husband Sir James Watt, was first transformed into Cheadle town hall and later converted into commercial offices. Christie was really devoted to Abney Hall. After her father's death Agatha and her mother used to spend the Christmas holidays there in the North. It is her brother-in-law (Abney Hall's owner) who gave her the idea of the criminal as a Dr Watson-type character (she eventually employed it in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*). Therefore, the problem of the country house affected her directly.

The years following the two world conflicts, "years of crisis for the country house"[79], witnessed its gradual disappearance, with many of them being sold and reconfigured for institutional purposes, while others were being demolished. When those people running the country ceased to live in manor houses – it had become more expensive to maintain them, so numerous were left empty – they lost their political role as powerhouses, as Mark Girouard calls them. "The result was a large number of surplus country houses which, where

[79] Giles Worsley, *England's Lost Houses*. London, UK: Aurum Press 2002, p. 105.

no alternative use could be found, were unsentimentally demolished […] that explains why at least 1,200, probably as many as 1,700, country houses – that is one-sixth of all country houses extant in 1900 – were demolished in the twentieth century."[80] Those were the years of Christie's most famous country house novels.

The connection between Christie and the English country house has often increased the criticism against her and the academic disapproval of her novels.

> The country house and drawing-room settings of the novels […] are not a reflection of contemporary life, but a recollection of Paradise Lost. Through them, the Good Life of antebellum days was relived – in imagination if not in reality.[81]

Ernest Mandel accuses Christie of refusing contemporary reality, writing about a happy age – the pre-war age of the country house – to nostalgically remember what has been and what will never return; a critique usually reinforced by the supposed conservative nature of Christie's narrative. However, the representation of the country house in the novels I have chosen to analyse, reveals how it undergoes radical changes, in parallel with the vast social and political changes experienced by England during the 20th century. The evolution of Styles Court from a manor house in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* to a guest house in *Curtain*, epitomises the end of a glorious era, the era of the ruling landed gentry and its powerhouses. Gossington Hall, the mansion the reader encounters in *The Body in the Library,* has completely lost its role as a family home within St Mary Mead in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. Here the country house has been affected by a dimension of the contemporary world, the cinema industry. In *Dead Man's Folly*, in conclusion, the destiny of the country house is already settled. Its owner, the last representative of the English ruling elite, is unmasked as the murderer, and with him the magnificent summer

[80]Giles Worsley, "Beyond the Powerhouse: Understanding the Country House in the Twenty-First Century", *Historical Research*, Volume 78. No. 201, August 2005, pp. 427-428.

[81] Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*. London, UK: Pluto 1984, p. 30.

of the English landed gentry comes to an end. Nonetheless, Christie's country house novels reveal a deep socio-historical dimension. Her fictitious country houses are not static and stable entities of a nostalgic time, as they might appear to be at first sight. On the contrary, they mirror the social instabilities of that specific historical moment, and the miserable fate of their real world-counterparts.

2.3 Dangerous Rooms vs. Safe Rooms: From Maps to Stories

Agatha Christie was very fond of country houses. All her life revolved around the acquisition and the decoration of houses and she has loved writing about English mansions that often bear great similarity with her family homes. A life-long passion which dates back to her childhood home in Torquay, where she lived in a Victorian mansion called Ashfield, and which continues in adulthood, finding its best expression in the purchase of the "dream house" Greenway, her beloved holiday home. Her passion for houses is revealed in the *Autobiography* since her earliest memories as a child, when playing with her dollhouse was her favourite indoor pastime. She describes how she redecorated and refurbished it, and how a huge cupboard was transformed into a six-storeyed house. When thinking about the past, she writes, "Looking back over the past, I become increasingly sure of one thing. My tastes have remained fundamentally the same. What I liked playing with as a child, I have liked playing with later in life. Houses, for instance (AB, p. 60). The passion continued in later years when the child's fervour soon "developed into a never-ending house syndrome."[82]

Christie's fondness of country houses has affected her narratives to a point that every geographical location, whether in London, in the countryside

[82] Patricia D. Maida & Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*. Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press 1982, p. 14.

or abroad, is constructed as an ideal country house, with its structure and closeness. The large home surrounded by infinite acres of land, far from the perils of the city, where family and friends gather together, is an apparent harmonious paradise hiding a Jekyll and Hyde-like character. Larmouth has confessed that the country house is the best of all murder backgrounds because

> It provides the largest canvas; a grand gesture of land, the rumblings and innuendos of nature, a clearing in the midst of civilization for the interplay of character.[83]

Christie's houses are usually constructed from her memories of both Ashfield, her childhood home in Torquay, and of the several country houses she visited, inhabited and purchased during her life. From the outside her imaginary family homes usually look like grandiose premises, surrounded by massive gardens, carefully planted lawns, distinctive terraces and centuries-old trees. The interior spaces are divided in a library, drawing-rooms, dining-rooms, bedrooms (usually on the upper floor), vast corridors and huge staircases and, like any self-respecting English country house, a special space reserved for servant quarters, where the action never takes place. The houses are U-shaped or L-shaped, contain two wings while their maps, usually provided by the first-person narrator, constitute a very important part of the novel.

Agatha Christie employed maps from the very beginning of her career. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles Court* Captain Hastings offers a map to the readers, indicating the family arrangements during the night when the matriarch is poisoned in her sleep. ''To make this part of my story clear, I append the following plan of the first floor of Styles'' (MAS, 25), says Hastings, and introduces it within the narration. The map (Figure 1) illustrates the upper floor of the mansion – the downstairs floor was reserved for social life. Every room is labelled, including the one where the crime is committed (the room indicated by a red arrow). The map demonstrates how the family members have ready access to the crime scene using three separate doors.

[83] Jeanine Larmouth, *Murder on the Menu*. New York, NY: Scribner 1972, p. 3

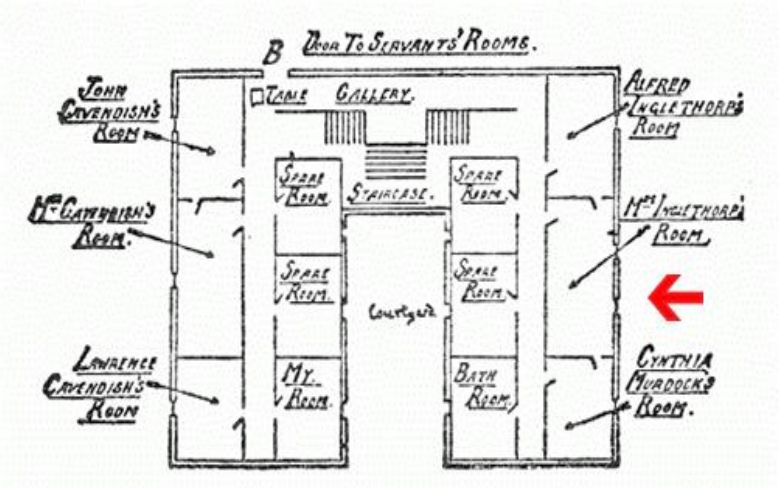

Figure 1 The map of Styles Court, provided by Captain Hastings, the night of the murder.

As the story unfolds and Hercule Poirot, who happens to live in the village as a Belgian refuge, is given the task of solving the intricate mystery, Captain Hastings draws an additional map, this time focusing on the detailed representation of the interior space of Mrs Inglethorp's bedroom, the scene of the crime (Figure 2). The map is provided, in this case, at the beginning of Poirot's investigation.

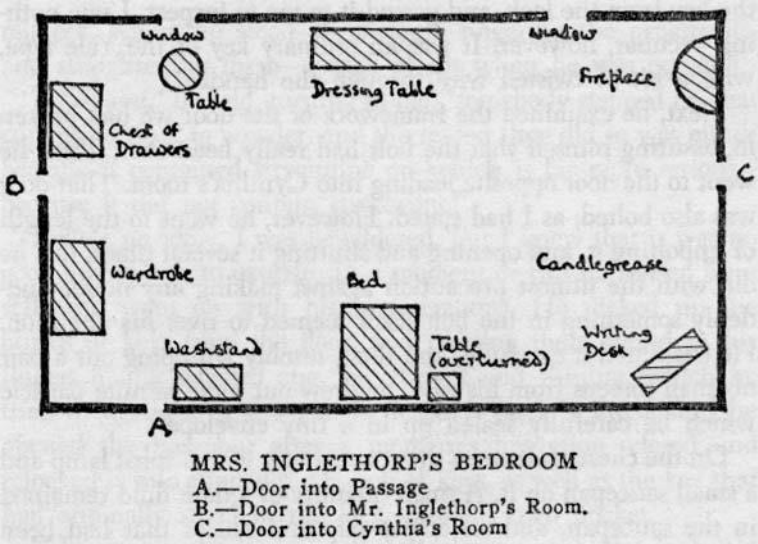

Figure 2 Map of the scene of the crime.

The two maps, according to Sally Bushell, delineate Tzvetan Todorov's dual temporal and narrative structure, since the first map (the floor plan – figure 1) relates to the conclusion of the first narrative – the story of the crime – while the second map (the victim's bedroom – figure 2) marks the beginning of the second narrative – the story of the investigation.[84] The detective leading the second story needs to travel into past events to solve the crime. His investigation involves a particular "mapping out of spatial and human relations to reconstruct the first structure and so resolve the narrative. Only once everything is 'in place' can the truth emerge."[85]

The use of maps and house plans became a very common practice during the Golden Age, when the detective genre came to be associated with the fair play rule. In this respect, Robert Barnard in *A Talent to Deceive* writes, ''We are entering the age when plans of the house were an indispensable aid to the aspirant solver of detective stories."[86] Readers were challenged to participate in the solving process at the side of great detectives and encouraged to read

[84] Cfr. Sally Bushell, "The Slipperiness of Literary Maps: Critical Cartography and Literary Cartography", *Cartographica*, Volume 47. No. 3, 2012, p. 156.
[85] Ibidem, p. 155.
[86] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 23.

and interpret the maps rather than merely looking at them. Christie's fiction and her recurrent use of maps activate the reader response, creating the spatiality of reading. In fact, readers always go back to look at the map in order to locate the characters. However, as Sally Bushell has demonstrated, Christie's maps eventually appear to be merely illusions constructed on the narrowed and subjective point of view of the unreliable narrator. The slipperiness of her maps, Sally Bushell argues, becomes evident when, in the concluding remarks of her novels, the detective solves the case demonstrating how the maps provided by his sidekick are incomplete or false. Therefore, Christie's maps clarify two separate aspects: the spatiality of the detective genre (the murder occurred in this specific place); and the map's ability to convey what the narrator wants the reader to see.

The use of maps, diagrams and house plans has gradually lost its relevance within the crime genre, but nowadays there are cases worth remembering. Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose*, a pastiche of detective story set in the Middle Ages, presents both maps and crime scene diagrams. Before the prologue and the incipit, the reader is introduced to the story through a map showing the orientation of a 14th century abbey located in the mountains of Northern Italy. This map is an essential key for following Eco's heavily convoluted plot and re-establishes that intellectual game, so popular during the Golden Age, between the reader and the detective. Whereas the case of Eco is, I would say, exceptional, in the popular subgenre of the whodunit, on the contrary, the presence of a detailed house and room plans had become a fundamental characteristic of the narration, symbolising the deep spatiality of the genre.

Agatha Christie employs them again in 1926 in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the novel which consecrated her as the Golden Age's greatest writer. Although diverging opinions exist as regards the classification of the novel as a masterpiece[87] - back in 1926 it was condemned as a cheat by several members

[87] Howard Haycraft included the novel in his list of the most influential crime novels ever written, defining it "brilliant" (*Murder for Pleasure*, 1941, p. 130).

of the Detection Club – readers from all over the world are still fascinated by its twisting and controversial ending.

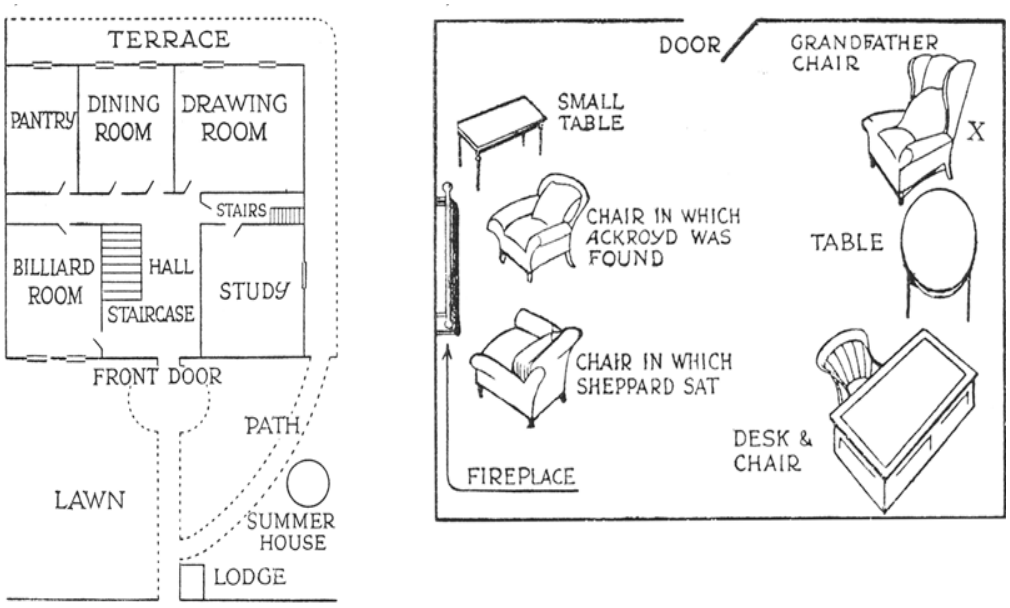

Figure 3 Map of the house plan and of the studio where Ackroyd is killed

Figure 3 presents two first edition maps included in the novel, on the left a floor plan of the house and its surroundings, and a detailed plan of murder scene on the right. As it has been the case with *The Mysterious Affair at Styles Court*, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the maps are provided by the first-person narrator, Dr Sheppard, who occupies Hastings' role as Poirot's inexpert sidekick. '' 'You must indeed have been sent from the good God to replace my friend Hastings,' he said, with a twinkle. 'I observe that you do not quit my side''' (MRA, p. 101), Poirot comments when he assumes the role of the investigator. The

Robert Barnard writes: "Apart — and it is an enormous 'apart' — from the sensational solution, this is a fairly conventional Christie [...] A classic, but there are some better Christies (*A Talent to Deceive*, 1990, p. 32).

formula Dr Sheppard uses to justify the presence of the maps reminds Hastings' words in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles Court* (see page 52). Dr Sheppard explains: "To make things clear and explain the position, I have appended a rough sketch of the right-hand wing of the house" (MRA, p. 58). This formula sanctions the starting point of the competition between readers and detective. However, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the map of the murder site is misleading because is provided by the murderer. Poirot reconstructs the night of the murder referring to the grandfather chair located by the door of the victim's study/library. The narrator, unmasked as the culprit, has moved it from its original place to hide his involvement in the murder. Hence, the map he presents alters the reality by reproducing what the murderer wants the reader – and the detective – to see. There is an interesting intersection here between the acts of narration, crime-solving and map-making, all three performed by the same character. Moreover, as Stephen Knight has observed, Poirot solves the case thanks to a great sense of time and place. Dr Sheppard has taken "too long to move from the front door to the gate of Ackroyd's house."[88]

The intent of Christie's maps, writes Bargainnier, "is to create greater verisimilitude: the place exists in space; here is where it happened."[89] In fact, Christie's maps clarify the spatiality of the genre, underlining that the murder occurred in that specific place. The domestic space of her novels is divided into several distinct zones: dangerous and safe places. Murders, indeed, do not occur in every room of the house. Each one of them has its symbolic status. Looking at the scenes of the crime in the maps of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles Court* (Figure 2) and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Figure 3), the victims are killed respectively in the bedroom and in the library-study. In Christie's domestic households, undeniably, the most dangerous spaces are the libraries and the bedrooms. According to Maida and Spornick, libraries and studios are dangerous for differing reasons.[90] The library/studio is not as busy as the drawing room and it is often open and accessible to everyone. Characters can

[88] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 119.
[89] Earl Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, cit., p. 25.
[90] Cfr. Maida & Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, cit., p. 183.

get in or out passing through its large windows – in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and in *The Secret of Chimneys* the large French windows, for instance, provide an easy escape for the assassins. Its dusty shelves and cupboards can conceal secret letters and personal diaries behind ancient books. Furthermore, the fireplace – every library was provided with one old-fashioned fireplace – can destroy incriminating clues and inconvenient wills. As a matter of fact, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the assassin burns a convicting letter in the fireplace of the library where he has stabbed the town squire.

In *The Secret of Chimneys*, where Chimneys is the ancestral country house where the events take place, the murder occurs in the Council Chamber, a library which hides a secret passage leading to Wyvern Abbey. Whereas in *The Body in the Library* it is inside this impersonal space where the corpse of a young blond woman is found "across the old bearskin hearthrug"[91], wrapped in cheap dancer clothes, in the respectable house of the wealthiest people of St Mary Mead. "[S]he doesn't look real at all" (BL, p. 9), Mrs. Bantry exclaims on the phone to Miss Marple. Indeed, the sensual appearance of the young girl clashes with the elegance of the locale in which she interferes. She is an element of disturbance. "It was a cheap, tawdry, flamboyant figure – most incongruous in the solid old-fashioned comfort of Colonel Bantry's library" (BL, p. 11). As such, it is obvious that she belongs to an inferior social class and that her presence destroys the order and the harmony commonly associated with the library. In the foreword to the novel, Christie argues that "the library in question must be a highly orthodox and conventional library. The body, on the other hand, must be a wildly improbable and highly sensational body" (BL, p. vii). The incongruity here is evident: the victim is transgressive, young, sensual and poor, denoting the deep gap between her class and the upper middle-class world of the Bantry family.

In *The Secret of Chimneys*, the library is presented as a mysterious room, richly furnished with important paintings at its walls, including two Van Dycks

[91] Agatha Christie, *The Body in the Library*. New York, NY: William Morrow & Co. 2016, p. 11. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

and a Velazquez, the narrator affirms.[92] A spring concealed at the side of a family portrait reveals a dark opening leading to a secret underground tunnel which, in some respects, evokes Gaston Bachelard's perception of the cellar. The French philosopher, whose work *The Poetics of Space* applies the method of phenomenology to the architectural space of the house, argues that the cellar "is first and foremost the *dark entity* of the house"[93] and the place of irrationality and the unconscious. The cellar as a mysterious place where darkness prevails both day and night and where fears become exaggerated. In *The Secret of Chimneys*, the labyrinthine obscure corridor epitomises the dark entity of the estate, in line with Bachelard's expressed ideas, a place long been shut from the outside world. The reader in it, to use Bachelard's words, is "in the intimate space of underground manoeuvres."[94] The peculiarity in *The Secret of Chimneys* is the fact that the secret passage, apart from being the dark entity of the home, is the limbo space between reality and legends and is somehow connected to a mystery going back seven years, and to a consequent homicide. The library milieu also provides the possibility to employ bizarre and exotic murder weapons, usually gifted to the patriarch by friends or they are souvenirs bought during trips abroad. For instance, in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the victim is stabbed within his own library with a Tunisian dagger, a beautiful, ornate blade belonging to Roger's personal collection, stolen by the assassin during a visit to the house.

Clearly Christie has deprived the library of its essential role within the country house. In the typical English manor house, the library was an indispensable room for the educated and wealthy gentry. Constructed as an exclusive male domain which women would only visit when invited[95], it was the perfect room where men could pursue hobbies, read in tranquillity and smoke a cigar away from the noisy spaces of the drawing room.[96] Libraries were always

[92] Agatha Christie, *The Secret of Chimneys*. London, UK: Harper UK 2001, p. 170.
[93] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, trans. by Maria Jolas. New York, NY: Penguin Group 2014 p. 39
[94] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, cit., p. 43.
[95] Cfr. David N. Durant, *Life in the Country House*. London, UK: John Murray 1996, p. 189
[96] Cfr. Barty Phillips, *The Country House Book*. Topsfield, MA: Salem House 1988, p. 122.

furnished with splendour. Cupboards and shelves filled with books of bygone eras, precious manuscripts and collections were valuable possessions and the prerequisites of every country house library. It was a status symbol and its importance grew particularly during the reign of Queen Victoria, when both literacy and the value of education were becoming more appreciated, and family book collections were outgrowing in number. The motif of a dead body in such restricted but élite places becomes more and more frequent in the Golden Age whodunit subgenre, when the brutality of a murder must perturb the domestic and family centred world. A violent assassination clashes with the refinement and the elegance of the antique country house. Its magnificent library epitomises "a classic image of social order", where the discovery of "the body must suggest the scandalous and disreputable"[97], and where to quote W. H. Auden, "the corpse must shock not only because it is a corpse but also because, even for a corpse, it is shockingly out of place […]."[98]

The same aura of peril surrounds the master's bedroom, the place that delineates the intimate area of life. Its isolated position from the communal life of the downstairs floor makes it easier for intruders to enter the room furtively. Here they can search for any incriminating evidence or alter medicines through the addition of poison. It is a solitary place where secrets, lies and keys are concealed, a room full of drawers, chests and wardrobes "all hiding-places in which human beings […] keep or hide their secrets."[99] The bedroom, like the library, is usually provided with a fireplace that, where appropriate, is used to destroy evidences, uncomfortable wills and incriminating letters. The bedroom is the reign of the matriarch or the patriarch and their death is commonly caused by poisoning while they are locked in their apparently safe and secure territory. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles Court* the victim, Emily Inglethorp, dies in her bedroom – but the homicide is prepared well in advance by adding bromide powders to the victim's medicine, causing a large amount of strychnine to be

[97] R. A. York, *Agatha Christie: Power and Illusion*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2007, pp. 13-14.

[98] W. H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story by and Addict", *Harper's Magazine*, May 1948, p. 408.

[99] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, cit., p. 95

taken in the final dose. Something similar happens to the victim in *Crooked Hou*se, where the patriarch, Aristide Leonides, dies in the comfort of his bedroom, poisoned with his own eye medicine via an insulin injection. Both the bedroom and the library represent a different version of Edgar Allan Poe's locked room.

The drawing room and the kitchen are the safest places in Christie's fictional houses. Comfortable and warm, the drawing room was the main living area of the household, where the inhabitants and the house guests would meet before dinner, gather together, sing and play music, converse or play communal games or cards.[100] The drawing room was the space reserved for meetings and for other social events. Frequently, Christie's houses include more than one drawing room. For instance, in *Crooked House* the household is divided in three separate apartments, each one of them with a private drawing room (see page 65).

A separate world from the rest of the house, the kitchen was not designed for living in but simply for work. It was a place destined to the servants and family members hardly ventured in it. In Agatha Christie's country houses, the kitchen corresponds to the safest place, where murders never occur.[101] It occupies a peripheral position compared to the other rooms of the house and is usually dwelled by the servants, who always play a very marginal role in Christie's narratives. The sanctity of this place is never violated by unscrupulous murderers and the tragic events of the household do not affect the rituals of breakfast and dinners. For Christie food is a fundamental part of the setting and, at the same time, it is a constant factor of her narratives. Food, according to Larmouth, "serves an important function in giving a sense of reality"[102] , and, in many cases, a sense of normalcy and domesticity. The proper English breakfast and the ceremony of the afternoon tea with biscuits, milk and honey, are often described within her novels, underlining, once more, Christie's preoccupation with notions of England and Englishness. These traditional rituals continue

[100] Cfr. Barty Phillips, *The Country House Book*, cit., p. 114.
[101] Cfr. Maida & Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, cit., p. 184.
[102] Jeanine Larmouth, *Murder on the Menu*, cit., p. 156.

undisturbed and many characters refuse to speak of murder during mealtimes. It is not accidental that Christie's detectives and criminals are often described while drinking tea or eating delicious cakes. However, Christie reminds us that food can be easily deprived of its vital force and altered into a murder weapon. When this is the case, food becomes a vehicle for poison and loses its traditional cultural symbolism of safety, domesticity and home.[103] The author's fascination for food accompanies the reader throughout Christie's vast collection of detective fiction. For the detectives and the readers food provides a temporary relief from the uncertainties and vulnerabilities of human relationships, from the blood and chaos of murder and violence. The safe ritual of eating temporarily interrupts the investigation, increasing the suspense, as the detective transmutes the dining pause into an occasion to reflect about the occurrences. Furthermore, food humanises the detectives and, at the same time, gives a sense of reality to the world they investigate.

2.4 The Crooked Child of the Little Crooked House: The House as an Unhomely Place

According to the Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, "places are centers of felt value where biological needs, such as those for food, water, rest, and procreation are satisfied".[104] Hence, home falls into the category of place theorized by the geographer. For Gaston Bachelard, the house is "the human being's first world and his [sic] first universe".[105] Without it, the human being would be a dispersed being. "It maintains him through the storms of the heavens and through those of life. It is body and soul."[106] Before the human being is "cast into the world", she/he is laid in "the large cradle of the house […] Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of

[103] Cfr. Silvia Baucekova, "The Flavour of Murder: Food and Crime in the Novels of Agatha Christie", *Prague Journal of English Studies*, Volume 3. No 1, September 2014, p. 39.
[104] Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis, MT: University of Minnesota Press 2001, p. 4.
[105] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* cit., p. 29.
[106] Ibidem.

the house."[107] The house, the human being's personal corner in the world, inspires protection, intimacy and bliss. The German philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow, following Bachelard's idea of the house's 'protective value', depicts the house as a secure place marked by protective walls and by a sheltering roof, where the walls delineate the separation between inner space – the space of security, and outer space – the space of threat.

> The outer space is the space for activity in the world […] it is the space of insecurity, of danger and vulnerability […] This is why he (the man) needs the space of the house. This is the area of rest and peace […] a space to which man can retire and where he can relax. To give this peace to man is the supreme task of the house.[108]

The house, hence, offers shelter from the weather, reliable protection from danger "as well as from the unwelcome approach of strangers."[109] Within the secure walls of the house, the human being constructs the smallest unit of society, where the first human relationships are shaped and where the individual personalities are created. The house then becomes the family home, the social space where humans first experience life.

In Christie's narratives, the perception of the house conceived as a nurturing and safe place where to find shelter from the attacks of the outside world, is underlined at first and then drastically violated. The house, indeed, is deprived of its maternal function and security and it is quickly revealed as the opposite of homely.[110] Sigmund Freud opens his 1919 essay "The Uncanny" by giving a definition of what uncanny is: "belonging to all that is terrible – to all that arouses dread and creeping horror."[111] The father of psychoanalysis defines the uncanny in relation to the German words 'Heimlich' or 'homely', against the

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[107] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space,* cit., p. 29.

[108] Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Human Space*, trans. by Christine Shuttleworth. London, UK: Hyphen Press 2011, p. 125.

[109] Ibidem, p. 126.

[110] Cfr. Alison Light, *Forever England: Femininity, Literature and Conservatism Between the Wars*. New York, NY: Routledge 1991, p. 92.

[111] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny", in *Collected Papers. Volume IV*. London, UK: The Hogarth Press 1925, p. 368.

'unheimlich' or 'unhomely'. Freud writes that the terms 'Heimlich' and 'unheimlich' are used interchangeably to describe the uncanny. In fact, what is uncanny is both unhomely and homely. Unheimlich is not exactly the opposite of homely, but rather a term that designates a sense of estrangement within the home, the existence of something menacing and unknown that lies within the confines of the intimate. As a matter of fact, Heimlich relates to something which is known and familiar on the one hand, and hidden and concealed on the other. According to Homi Bhabha the state of the "unhomely" is not a state of lacking a home, or the opposite of having a home, it is rather the creeping recognition that the line between the world and the home is breaking down; it is the alienating sense of relocating the home in an unfamiliar space. As Bhabha puts it:

> In that displacement, the border between home and world becomes confused; and, uncannily, the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting.[112]

Bhabha's words depict the situation within Christie's country house novels, where the world perceived as a homeless place has penetrated deep into the domestic sphere. Whereas with Sherlock Holmes the dangerous places are located in the outside world – the only secure place in nineteenth century Victorian London is his home in Baker Street – Christie violates the idea of the house perceived as a safe microcosm. Moreover, her fictional houses are not constructed as a female-ordered world. She disrupts the Victorian image of angel in the house through the lack of the maternal figure and violates Bachelard's idea of the house protective value. Whereas in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* the mother figure is killed, in *Crooked House* the mother Magda is described as cruel and ruthless.

The 1949 novel *Crooked House* remains the most emblematic example of how Christie destroyed the myth of the house as a nurturing place. Here, the collapse of the secure boundaries between outer space and home intimacy

[112] Homi Bhabha, "The World and the Home", *Social Text - Third World and Post-Colonial Issues*, Volume 10. No 2, January 1992, p. 141.

together with the uncanny feeling associated with a familiar/unfamiliar place pervades the narration. The unhomely house of the title induces feelings of disorientation, role ambiguity and a profound sense of discomfort. In her *Autobiography* Agatha Christie described *Crooked House* as the novel which satisfied her the best (AB, p. 520). The Crooked house where the action takes place is a sprawling mansion called Three Gables located in Swinly Dean, close to the fictional town of Market Basing, described by the narrator as "the well-known outer suburb of London, which boasts three excellent golf courses for the city financier."[113] Three Gables was built at the beginning of the XX century by Aristide Leonides, a Greek businessman, as a gift for his first wife and later divided into three separate houses where several generations of Leonides live together under the patriarch's wings.

> One brother, one sister, a mother, a father, an uncle, an aunt by marriage, a grandfather, a great-aunt, and a step grandmother. [...] Of course, we don't normally all live together. The war and blitzes have brought that about. But [...] perhaps spiritually the family has always lived together—under my grandfather's eye and protection. (CH, p.4)

The crooked house presents a rigid spatial structure, with space organised in accordance with the family's needs. The ground floor is occupied by Aristide's son Philip with Magda his wife and their three children: Sophia, Eustace and Josephine. The first-floor is dedicated to old Aristide and his second wife, the young Brenda, while his son Roger has occupied the upper floor together with his wife Clemency. The personalities of the occupants of Three Gables are presented through the descriptions of the drawing rooms of the three different apartments. Philip's drawing room is very eccentric, an expression of his actress wife's personality. The walls are covered with pictures of actors, dancers, stage scenes and vases with flowers decorate the tables. As Clemency puts it, this room is "just a stage set. A background for Magda to play her scenes against"

[113] Agatha Christie, *Crooked House*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2017, p. 4.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

(CH, p. 135). The drawing room of the first-floor apartment belonging to Aristide himself, is a less sophisticated but a comfortable room furnished with "coloured cretonnes very gay in colour and striped silk curtains […]and, in the middle, the portrait of a little man with dark piercing eyes" (CH, p. 65). The portrait on the wall exemplifies the power of the patriarch. His eyes control the space of the house and, at the same time, the lives of those people living under his authority. The last drawing room, the one located on the upper floor apartment, is an expression of Clemency's scientist mind. The walls are all white, no pictures, no ornaments and hardly any furniture. Charles – the amateur detective of the story – associates each drawing room to the personality of its occupants: "Curious things rooms, they tell you quite a lot about the people who live in them" (CH, p. 63).

Family matters and intrigue enliven this novel where the least likely suspect formula has found one of its best expressions when, in the concluding remarks, the young Josephine is discovered to be the only responsible for two murders. She is Philip's younger daughter, age eleven or twelve (CH, p. 83); she is an ugly girl and not very feminine. She uses violence to protect herself and to gain power over her brother. She enjoys reading murder mysteries and snooping at doors. Her family dislikes her to a point that no one puts in a nice word for her. "That child," Sophia says, "is a bit of a problem", (CH, p. 98). "Sometimes I think that child isn't right in her head. She has horrible sneaky ways and she looks queer. She gives me the shivers sometimes" (CH, p. 76), Brenda says. She is "a rotten kid" (CH, p. 156) according to her brother Eustace and Charles himself, the narrator, labels her as a "malicious gnome" (CH, p. 119) who "had the suddenness of a demon in an old-fashioned pantomime" (CH, p. 161). There is no sympathy for her not even from her mother Magda, who has no words of affection for her child, other than "my funny ugly baby" (CH, p. 178) and "curious changeling" (CH, p. 178-179, 216, 238).

Of all Christie's murderers, Josephine is the youngest and the only one whose psychology is given more accurate details. Her deviant behaviours are the result of several causes which have blended and given life to a violent and cruel child. Traditionally, the family home plays the major influence in shaping one's life and one's perception towards the outer world. The family primarily

encourages the child's attitude and beliefs because it is in the home, with the family, where the child first learns the essential lessons in life. Hence, how the child behaves in the home and in the society is a result of the values acquired from the family. Josephine's family and home are crooked, like the title suggests. The house has "a strange air of being distorted" (CH, p. 26), described by the narrator as "a cottage swollen out of all proportion. It was like looking at a country cottage through a gigantic magnifying glass – it was a little crooked house that had grown like a mushroom in the night!" (CH, p. 26). The 'crookedness' runs in the family blood. The patriarch, Aristide Leonides, is frequently described as being "crooked", "nothing much to look at. Just a gnome – ugly little fellow – but magnetic – women always fell for him" (CH, p. 17). Sophia, Leonides' granddaughter, insists: "we're a very queer family" (CH, p. 29). As a matter of fact, Three Gables is just a house, not a family home, it is a cold space where the family lives for convenience – the wealthy patriarch contributes to their financial needs, being the family's only source of income. Its residents have no values and they fail to follow the traditional roles – Josephine's parents, for instance, are passive and static characters, they are more artists than parents, locked in their imaginary worlds (he writes pseudo-historic books, she is always busy playing the role of the actress).

The issue of parenting plays a central role both in the narration and in Josephine's emotional development. The absence of a typical mother-daughter relationship lies heavy on the little girl, brought up by her aunt Edith and by a tireless nannie. The child of an unreliable and cruel mother, Josephine has grown up unscrupulous and ruthless. Magda, her mother, is a mediocre actress who has never taken care of her children. She perceives every family scene as a stage show in which she wants to play the leading part ("I think I played that properly", CH, p. 46). With an emotionally absent and a dismissive mother, Josephine has become lonely, overconfident, cruel and selfish. Her loneliness is the first thing the reader notices. She is alone in the big but not-so-comfortable house, she has no friends and does not go to school. A private teacher, hired by her grandfather, is in charge of her education. But "she ought to have gone to school, and have children of her own age to play with" (CH, p. 126). She is

overconfident and reveals her arrogance when she declares "the police are stupid" (CH, p. 97).

> Eustace and I know a lot of things, but I know more than Eustace does. I'm going to write down everything in a notebook and then, when the police are completely baffled, I shall come forward and say, 'I can tell you who did it' (CH, p. 88).

Josephine is nosey, no secrets of the house are safe when she is around. She listens at doors and writes what she discovers in a little black book she always carries with her. However, the astonishing conclusion of the story reveals the cruelty and the selfishness of her personality.

> "Are you sorry your grandfather's death?" I asked.
> "Not particularly. I didn't like him much. He stopped me learning to be a ballet dancer."
> "Did you want to learn ballet dancing?"
> "Yes, and mother was willing for me to learn, and father didn't mind, but grandfather said I'd be no good" (CH, p. 86).

The child's broken dream and the patriarch's control over every family business, reveal his financial tyranny. Every decision, even the most innocent, must be subjected to his persona. All the family members somehow long to free themselves and spread their wings: his second wife Brenda has a secret affair with the children's tutor; both his daughters-in-law, Magda and Clemency, long to escape the house and follow their paths. His grandson, Eustace, wants to run off to college; even Josephine hopes at last he will allow her to take ballet lessons. The tension really escalates in the closing climax when the girl's secret diary reveals an unsettling truth. She is the murderer.

> The truth had stuck out so clearly all along. Josephine and only Josephine fitted in with all necessary qualifications. Her vanity, her persistent self-importance delight in talking, her reiteration on how clever she was, and how stupid the police were" (CH, p. 236).

Josephine shows her bad temper by making plan to kill those people who make her angry. She killed her grandfather because he would not let her take

ballet lessons and killed her devoted nanny because she called her "a silly girl" and it was getting boring and all the best detective stories have a second murder. Her confessions also reveal her future intentions to kill her mother.

> Grandfather wouldn't let me do bally dancing so I made my mind I would kill him [...] I don't want to go to Switzerland. If mother makes me, I will kill her too […] Nannie's dead. I am glad. I haven't decided yet where I'll hide the bottle with the little pill things. (CH, p. 239-40).

Josephine's aggressive attitude leads to unjustifiable criminal actions towards those people she calls family and, in the end, to her self-destruction. According to general opinion, the child connotes the image of innocence and purity, "incapable of transgressing morality."[114] Readers, and the narrator, fail to recognise her as the murderer, she is beyond of any suspicions. They are on Josephine's side because she is a child, the outcast of the family, the victim of selfishness and greediness. From her part, however, Josephine's denial of recognising her grandfather's and nanny's murders as not detective stories, denotes the child's inability to realise what she has really done. As a punishment, she is not allowed to grow old. Her great-aunt Edith, having discovered the macabre truth, takes the child on a car journey and deliberately crashes, asking Charles the narrator to hide the truth. The conclusion of the story is extremely disturbing.

> Walking about among people you know, looking in their faces – and suddenly the faces change – and it's not someone you know any longer – it's a stranger – a cruel stranger. (Sophia, CH, p. 229)

The title is taken from a nursery rhyme, a strategy frequently employed by Dame Christie.[115] She loved the contrast between the jolly rhythm of the

[114] J.C. Bernthal, *Queering Agatha Christie: Revisiting the Golden Age of Detective Fiction*. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, p. 186.

[115] "Sing a Song of Six Pence" (1929); *And Then There Were None* (1939); *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940); "Four and Twenty Blackbirds" (1940); *Five Little Pigs* (1943); "Three Blind Mice"

nursery rhymes and the violent behaviours of her strange characters. For John Curran, these nursery rhymes reveal "the juxtaposition of the childlike and the chilling, the twisting of the mundane into the macabre."[116] "Childlike" and "macabre" blend together in *Crooked House,* where the sinister reinterpretation of the nursery rhyme of the title leads to the unexpected uncanny conclusion (her publishers initially considered it too shocking, even for Agatha Christie). The story unfolds following the rhythm of the nursery rhyme, contributing to create a sense of tension essential to the overall atmosphere of suspense. The home which should protect the child from dangers, in the end transforms the child into a murderer. The ruthlessness running in the family blood has deprived the home of its nurturing role. The house that is supposed to provide protection to its dwellers reveals its fragility. The lack of a sense of belonging and of affection transmutes the home into a place of violence, a place to escape from. Offering no refuge from wickedness, home becomes a microcosm where greed and anger are concealed behind the mask oh hypocrisy. In *Crooked House* – and in Christie's oeuvre – home and family fail to provide stability and a bounded reassurance. In the novel, due to the patriarch's tyranny over their lives, every family member, including the young Josephine, has grown crooked, under the crooked man, in his crooked, strangely proportioned mansion on the outskirts of London.

(1947/1948, adapted into "The Mousetrap," 1952); *Mrs McGinty's Dead* (1952); *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953); *Hickory Dickory Dock* (1955).

[116] John Curran, *Agatha Christie's Secret Notebooks*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2010, p. 105-106.

Chapter 3

From Periphery to Centre: the English Village and the City of London

Introduction

Chapter 3 aims at investigating Agatha Christie's representations of both the English rural towns and of the city of London. The chapter is organized into two main sections – 3.1 and 3.2 – and each one of them is divided into several sub-sections. Section 3.1 focuses on the English countryside, with a special attention devoted to St Mary Mead – Christie's most famous imaginary village – with its plans and maps and the changes it undergoes after the end of the Second World War. The second part, section 3.2, sheds a light on the city of London, where, however, the author focuses more on the domestic life of the Londoners rather than on the location itself.

3.1 Mapping the Pastoral English Village

The Golden Age period, as it has been widely discussed in the previous chapters, witnessed the domestication of the detective genre, a process that involved every feature of the new emerging form of detective fiction, including the characters and the enclosed geographical milieu. Whereas in the Holmes adventures the criminals are, to quote Stephen Knight "respectable people gone wrong, turned aside from their proper roles"[117], though in one way or another they are marginal members of the society, in Christie's detective novels the criminals are members of the middle-class family. Her characters, indeed, "must always realize with alarm, the criminal is first of all *one of us* […] It is within the charmed circle of *insiders* that the criminal must be sought."[118] Undeniably, the threat in Christie's novels comes closer and takes place within what Knight calls "the ring-fence of middle-class family structure."[119] This shift of the criminal from within the middle-class itself to within the middle-class family structure witnessed the further retreat of the battlefield into an even more familiar and intimate space of action.

Agatha Christie's detective fiction has enormously contributed to the recognition of the English village worldwide. Edmund Crispin, novelist and critic, once wrote, "When one thinks of her, one thinks inevitably of English country life."[120] Hence, if mean streets and dangerous metropolis better represent the American hard-boiled genre, Christie's world is made of gardens in bloom, sunny landscapes and ostensibly idyllic villages. This difference of geographical locale is reflected in the different tone used by the two crime fiction subgenres. The American novels of the hard-boiled school are characterised by a harsh tone, violence and realistic descriptions of urban experiences and backgrounds. On the contrary, Christie's novels of the Golden Age school are narrated with a

[117] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction,* cit., p. 90.
[118] Alison Light, *Forever England*, cit., p. 88, 94 and 98
[119] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 90
[120] Edmund Crispin, "The Mistress of Simplicity", in *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime*, ed. H. R. F. Keating. London, UK: Weidenfeld & Nicolson 1977, p. 42.

genteel and comforting tone, together with the optimistic feeling that the detective will eventually restore order and bring tranquillity to the violated little community.

Christie's rural villages are all fictional and, to same extent, they all look alike: "Our village, King's Abbot, is, I imagine, very like any other village" (MRA, p. 7), declares Dr Sheppard the first-person narrator in the *Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, when he provides the readers with some ideas of the village "local geography" (MRA, p. 7). The resemblance between every Christie's fictional town is due to the fact that she based them all on the prototype of Torquay, her hometown in Devon where she spent her childhood and teenage years. In these "face-to-face communities"[121] everybody knows everyone else; people have only lived there, without knowing how life in the outside world is, hence they all know one another at sight and by name. The critic Colin Watson, in *Snobbery with Violence,* has coined the expression 'Mayhem Parva' to designate the typical milieu in Christie's novels: the fictional English village.

> The setting for the crime stories by what we might call the Mayhem Parva school would be a cross between a village and commuters' dormitory in the South of England, self-contained and largely self-sufficient. It would have a well-attended church, an inn with reasonable accommodation for itinerant detective-inspectors, a village institute, library and shop — including a chemist's where weed killer and hair dye might conveniently be bought. The district would be rural, but not uncompromisingly so — there would be a good bus service for the keeping of suspicious appointments in the nearby town, for instance — but its general character would be sufficiently picturesque to chime with the English suburb dweller's sadly uninformed hankering after retirement to the country.[122]

The Mayhem Parva is a stand-alone world, where modernity has been shut outside and where life is marked by the same habits and daily routines. It is a microcosm constructed as "an eternal fairyland disguised as an English

[121] K.D.M. Snell, "A Drop of Water from a Stagnant Pool? Inter-War Detective Fiction and the Rural Community". *Social History*, vol. 35, No. 1, 2010 p. 24.
[122] Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence*, cit., pp. 169-170.

village"[123], where people do not worry neither about life in London nor in the other areas of England. The world of Mayhem Parva appears to be light-years away from the daily realities of Europe. The internal structure of the Mayhem Parva-village is based on several standard features: the church with the vicarage, the public house, the manor house, the park, the parish hall and several cottages surrounded by picturesque gardens. Gardening is, in fact, a very common diversion among villagers and, where appropriate, the perfect excuse to spy into the lives of those around them: "Our hobbies and recreations can be summed up in the one word 'gossip'." (MRA, p. 7), Dr Sheppard admits without hesitation.

Christie's countryside towns are usually located in southern or Midland England, places that convey the image of "a sheltered provincial England."[124] Within these rural communities, the inhabitants of the Mayhem Parva epitomize the typical village figures: the country squire, the vicar and his wife, the doctor, retired army officers, spinsters, widows and servants. As Craig and Cadogan point out in *The Lady Investigates*,

> [E]veryone in England in 1930 was familiar with the mild vicar, the brisk nurse, the adenoidal kitchen maid, the effusive spinster, the gruff colonel, the pampered actress and the reliable doctor […] They are instantly recognizable; their appearance seems to rule out moral or psychological ambiguity […] this merely adds to the reader's enjoyment when one of them is decisively unmasked."[125]

The county squire is at the top of the hierarchical structure of the village society, a man who looks after the village, as Roger Ackroyd does, who "subscribes liberally to parish funds, [...] encourages cricket matches, Lads' Clubs, and Disabled Soldiers' Institutes. He is, in fact, the life and soul of our

[123] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 6

[124] Anna-Marie Taylor, "*Home* is Where the Heart is: The Englishness of Agatha Christie's Marple Stories", in *Watching the Detectives: Essays on Crime Fiction*, eds. Ian A. Bell & Graham Daldry. London & Basingstoke, UK: Macmillan 1990, p. 141.

[125] Patricia Craig & Mary Cadogan, *The Lady Investigates: Women Detective and Spies in Fiction*. London, UK: Gollancz 1981, p. 162.

peaceful village of King's Abbot" (MRA, p. 8). Equally important within this close-knit community is the vicar, who listens to his parishioners, preaches sermons, helps the poor and, like Vicar Clement from St Mary Mead teaches every Wednesday in Church Day School. Parsons' wives are also important figures, who frequently socialise with the villagers and act as mediators between them and their husbands. Vicar Clement's young wife Griselda, for instance, invites people to tea to discuss their problems and the newest gossips. As Griselda puts it, her duty as the vicar's wife is "[t]ea and scandal at four-thirty."[126] The role of the vicar is so significant that the villagers always try to please him: "[People] flutter around him and call him 'the dear Vicar', and embroider awful slippers for him, and give him bed-socks for Christmas" (MV, p. 509), says Griselda, mocking the parishioners' devotion towards her husband.

Together with the vicars, the doctors are highly regarded village inhabitants, who cover a very important social role. Dr Haydock from St Mary Mead embodies a typical example: "[He] is a good fellow, a big, fine, strapping man with an honest, rugged face" (MV, p. 534). Thanks to his social position, his professionalism and privileged knowledge of humankind, villagers trust the doctor, so does the reader. Hence when in the *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* doctor Sheppard is unmasked as the culprit, the readers hardly believe the truth. As both the only doctor within the little village of King's Abbot and the narrator of the investigation – he is also Poirot's sidekick – Sheppard "represents the two pillars of societal and textual reliability, and his identification as the murderer is therefore doubly threatening."[127] Both the doctor and the vicar are the most trusted figures within the community space. The devotion towards the vicar reminds the reader the centrality played by the Church in the life of the English village. The vicar, a reliable guide, denotes the spiritual centre of the village life. The same authority is influenced by the doctor. Traditionally, both the figures of the vicar and of the doctor have been exclusively male roles. Their reliability depends merely on the fact that, as men, they embody rationality and common

[126] Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*. London, UK: HarperCollins 1997, p. 500. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.
[127] John Scaggs, *Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 46.

sense. In Christie's rural villages the highest roles within the community are always occupied by men, while women are relegated to the domestic sphere, with gossip as their only diversion. However, in this patriarchal society it is the figure of Miss Marple who gains success through her 'domestic knowledge', despite the biased views about women.

Among Christie's male villagers retired army officers must also be considered. Having finished their service, they usually settle down in a quiet place away from chaos, where they can enjoy their retirement. An illustrative example is Major Burnaby. He is a person "that you would know as a military gentleman the first time you clapped eyes on him."[128] When he describes the village of King's Abbot, Dr Sheppard remarks: "Able-bodied men are apt to leave the place early in life, but we are rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers" (MRA, p. 7). Christie's stock figures also include unmarried women. They usually live in old Georgian houses and represent the largest – and the nosiest – group of the village inhabitants. Their main interest is the village gossip. In fact, they spend their days snooping at their neighbours, or meeting at the butcher to discuss the latest news. The vicar in *The Murder at the Vicarage* believes that they "eat their meals standing up by the window so as to be sure of not missing anything" (MV, p. 529). Within Christie's oeuvre, the figure who best personifies the typical spinster of the English village is Caroline, Dr Sheppard's unmarried sister in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, who is described as the nosiest among the spinsters of King's Abbot, whose greatest pleasure is to spread gossip among the other women. She is always the first to know what goes on in the village.

> Caroline can do any amount of finding out by sitting placidly at home. I don't know how she manages it, but there it is. I suspect that the servants and tradesmen constitute her Intelligence Corps. When she goes out, it is not to gather in information, but to spread it. At that, too, she is amazingly expert (MRA, p. 2).

[128] Agatha Christie, *The Sittaford Mystery*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2017, p. 140.

Caroline-the spinster plays an important role in Christie's work and the critic Robert Barnard believes she is one of her "best-realized minor characters."[129] A few years later after the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, Miss Sheppard was even used as a model figure to the creation of Agatha Christie's most famous spinster and woman detective, Miss Jane Marple.[130] The village she inhabits, St Mary Mead, is built on a very strong hierarchical structure that recalls the hierarchical organisation of the house. Home and village "contain similar kinds of power relationships […] with a head, a heart and hands – father, mother, children and servants (house) or squire, vicar, labourers (village) to maintain the life of the organism."[131] Thus, in Christie's rural towns, vicarages and manor houses occupy the highest and most powerful roles within the village pyramidal structure.

According to Maida and Spornick, the Christie village is constructed as a female domain with numerous spinsters and widows with a lot of time at their disposal, whose favourite hobbies are people and gossip.[132] "Too many women in this part of the world" (MV, p. 546), admits Colonel Melchett during the investigation of the Protheroe case. Christie's female-dominated rural towns give voice to an existent complication of that time England: the surplus women. The massive loss of men during the first world conflict had increased the number of unmarried women to a point that there were "1,098 women for every 1,000 men."[133] However, while real life England was dealing with the spinster problem, Christie converged a sarcastic and often comic idea of the unmarried woman committed to gossip.

[129] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 107.

[130] Janet Morgan, *Agatha Christie*. Glashow, UK: William Collins Sons & Co. 1985, p. 176.

[131] Kathy Mezei, "Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll." *Journal of Modern Literature*, vol. 30, No. 2, Winter 2007, p. 105.

[132] Cfr. Maida & Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, cit., p. 186.

[133] Kathy Mezei, "Spinsters, Surveillance, and Speech: The Case of Miss Marple, Miss Mole, and Miss Jekyll", cit., p. 104

3.1.1 The Geographical Mystery of St Mary Mead

Among Christie's villages, there is one who has gained its rightful position among the most widely known literary places: the small imaginary village of St Mary Mead, home of the astute Miss Jane Marple. Although it is now permanently associated with the spinster detective, the imaginary town was first used in a slightly different way. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, a minor Poirot novel Christie disliked – she wrote it just after the divorce to her first husband – St Mary Mead is the name of a village in Kent where some of the events take place. Therefore, the village was created before Miss Marple's actual birth. Christie later transfers that St Mary Mead to the fictitious realm of Miss Marple's world, marking the disappearance of the homonymous place in Kent. The village, as it is widely known today, makes its debut as the home of the spinster detective in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (Figure 4).

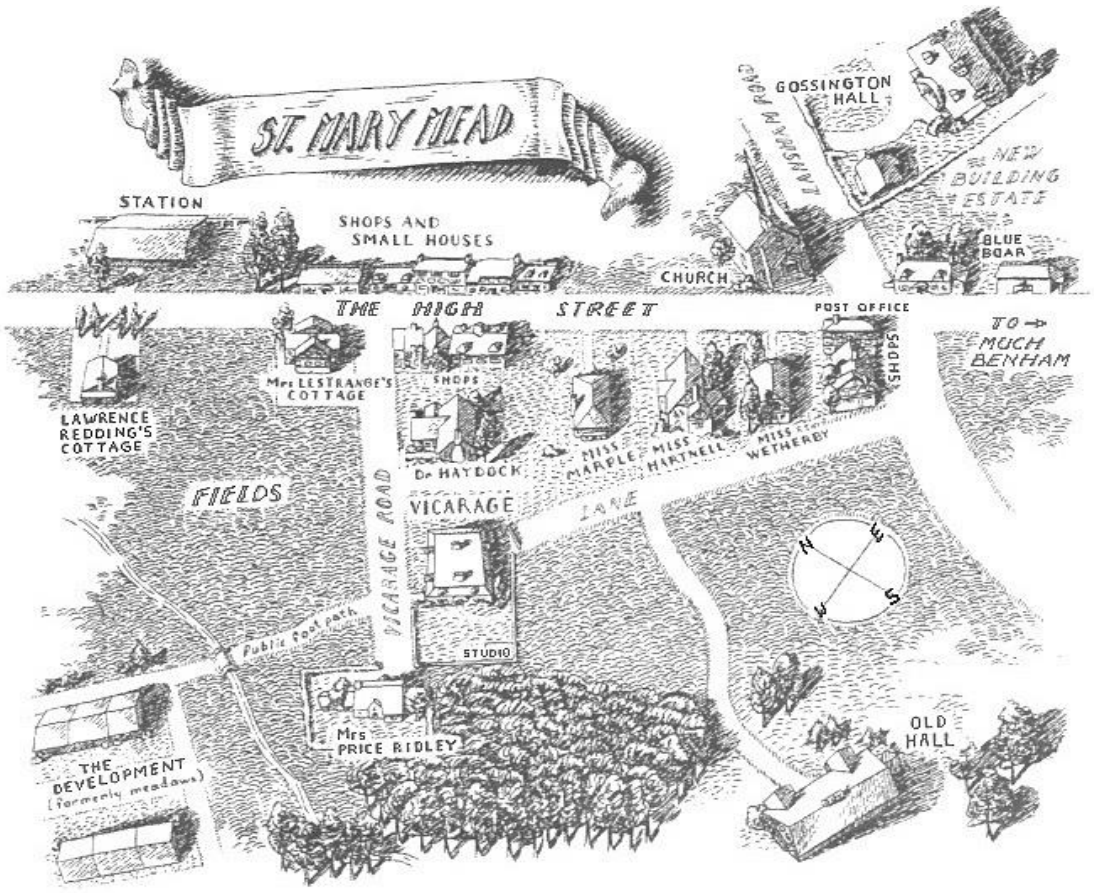

Figure 4 The Map of St Mary Mead

The map depicts the little village as it has evolved during the years. The original town described in *The Murder at the Vicarage* did not include the Development – an agglomerate of newly built houses in the south-west of the map – and the new building estate – Chatsworth in the north-east of the village – added to St Mary Mead during the years after the second world conflict. The village in the 1930s was nothing more than a fistful of houses surrounded by fields and woods.

The map shows the spatial layout of the small village, with its few buildings and connecting roads and lanes. Miss Marple's house lays right in the middle of the town, the most strategic position from which she can observe the village space and what is going on around her. In other words, the central location of her house on High Street warrants a 360-degree view in all directions. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, the colonel in charge of the case appeals to Miss Marple

on several occasions, just because her house and garden happen to be near the vicarage – the crime scene. "Well, it seems possible that owning to the position of your house and garden, you may have been able to tell us something we want to know about yesterday evening" (MV, p. 554). Everyone knows that nothing can go unnoticed with Miss Marple. Her passions for flowers, gardens and birdwatching force her to spend long hours outdoor, giving her the opportunity to observe carefully her fellow villagers' behaviours. The vicar Leonard Clement, the narrator of the story, never underestimates Jane Marple's hearing and seeing skills. She always "sees everything. Gardening is as good as a smoke screen, and the habit of observing birds through powerful glasses can always be turned to account" (MV, p. 516).

Looking at the map (figure 4), the reader soon notices the smallness of this enclosed universe. St Mary Mead, indeed, includes only one central road, the High Street, which crosses the town from the little station to the public house – the Blue Boar. Several houses and shops are located along the High Street including "our little church" (MV, p. 520) the Vicar calls it, with "some rather fine old stained glass and, indeed, the church itself is well worth looking at" (MV, p. 520). The church occupies the most significant role within the village community. It represents an important gathering place where people meet to exchange opinions about what is going on in the village. As Miss Marple explains in *Nemesis*, "in my own village, St Mary Mead, things do rather revolve around the church".[134] For instance, in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, after the assassination of Colonel Protheroe, the church is crowded with people during the evening mass. Vicar Leonard Clement does not attribute it to his sermons which, as he says, are "dull and scholarly" (MV, p. 664), but to a completely different reason. "Everybody had come [...] to see who else was there, and possibly exchange a little gossip in the church porch afterwards [...] All the village people were there […] I don't know when we have had such a crowded congregation" (MV, p. 664). The church, together with the vicarage and "the

[134] Agatha Christie, *Nemesis*. *Miss Marple Omnibus*. London, UK: HarperCollins 1997, p. 78.

little nest of Queen Ann and Georgian houses"[135] where the village spinsters live – Miss Marple, Miss Hartnell and Miss Wetherby – constitute the village core.

Apart from the church, the spatial structure of the village includes shops, the little station which serves a cheap train to London, the post office, two manor houses – Gossington Hall and the Old Hall – and The Blue Boar the public house. The entire town is surrounded by green fields, though farmers are almost absent from the narration. The villagers' houses are connected through several paths running across the infinite green of the rural expanses that convey the idea of a community still dedicated to agriculture and stock rearing. The two manor houses – Gossington Hall and the Old Hall – are positioned away from the main road. Gossington Hall "good, solidly built rather ugly Victorian" (MC, p. 35) lies along the Lansham Road, in the northeast area of the town. The Old Hall, a big Victorian house surrounded by woods and fields, faces on a secondary lane in the southeast zone. It is located away from the village core to which is connected through a road and a footpath cutting across the wood.

The latest additions to the village, as shown in Miss Marple's later novels, are situated – and it is not accidental – away from the High Street. The new building estate, called Chatsworth, faces on to a side road and occupies the area between the Blue Boar and Gossington Hall. It is made of sham Tudor houses with "distorted rustic" gates (BL, p. 22). Likewise, the Development, an agglomerate of newly-built houses, is located at the other extremity of the village, delimited by nothing more than woods and fields. The fact that the newcomers are banished to the outskirts of St Mary Mead and isolated from the town centre and from the village life, epitomises the feeling of suspiciousness residents have towards others, especially towards foreigners and outsiders.

An insider is someone who mentally and bodily fits into a particular enclosed space, where she or he feels at home. Everything within that space is familiar and ordered, where 'order', to quote Zygmunt Bauman "means a regular, stable environment for our action […] Only here can we rely on the habits and expectations we have acquired in the course of our being-in-the-

[135] Agatha Christie, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2016, p. 3. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

world."[136] The outsider, on the contrary, is the binary opposition to the insider, the one who feels constantly out of place, who does not share the same set of ordered laws the insider has. Excluding the outsider from the ordered routine of the insider space is an action dictated by the desire to preserve that order, the desire to keep "the environment understandable."[137] The insider-outsider binary is often accompanied by a spatial opposition between the two. For instance, the socio and geographical space of St Mary Mead is divided between two groups occupying two different spaces: an old and well-established class group – the insiders – and a newly-established one – the outsiders. The members of the first group – the villagers – develop negative stereotypes towards the representatives of the second group and banish the newcomers to the village borders, a space which recalls their original status as 'inbetweeners'.

St Mary Mead is a microcosm shut to progress and modernity; it is a non-welcoming community, where strangers are misjudged as dangerous people who can harm the social stability and the pseudo-peacefulness of the town. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, for instance, everyone slanders about the mysterious Mrs Lestrange, a newcomer who keeps her private life to herself, a choice which appears completely anomalous in a "one horse village" (MV, p. 560) like St Mary Mead, where "everyone knows your most intimate affairs" (MV, p. 527). When Colonel Protheroe is shot from behind in the vicar's studio, there is little sympathy for him – well, he was a foreigner after all, with a mysterious past. The same fate is shared by Roger Ackroyd when is murdered. Although he occupies the highest role within the community space of King's Abbot – he is the town squire – no one mourns his loss just because he is an outsider and not from the village of King's Abbot. He has, indeed, a Yorkshire surname. Likewise, within Miss Marple's novels there are some cases where "criminality is defined in relation to foreignness."[138] In *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, Giuseppe, the Italian butler working at Gossington Hall for the

[136] Zygmunt Bauman, *Postmodernity and its Discontents*. Washington Square, NY: New York University Press 1997, p. 7.
[137] Ibidem, p. 8.
[138] Neil McCaw, *Adapting Detective Fiction: Crime, Englishness and the TV Detectives*. London, UK & New York, NY: Continuum International Publishing Group 2011, p. 43.

actress Marina Gregg, is the 'foreign other', who functions as a scapegoat. However, in the end, he becomes one of the murdered victims and the stereotypical idea that the 'Otherness' violates the 'Englishness' is proved to be wrong. Christie, as Stephen Knight observes, "does not take the simple path of making the murderer a stranger, a foreigner or a servant: the threat is closer, more disturbing than that."[139] In her suspicious village communities, the respectable and racist insiders are often revealed as the ruthless murderers.

This resentment and the consequent villagers' rejection of foreigners is epitomised by the anonymous narrative voice in *The Body in The Library.* He employs adjectives with negative connotations when describing the new building estate, "distorted, sham Tudor, hideous" (BL, p. 22-23) thus reflecting the collective opinion about architectural changes and intruders. The narrator, hence, conveys the point of view of the entire community. Moreover, the "ghastly modern bit of building" (BL, p. 21), as Colonel Bantry labels the new building estate, is taken by the only outsider within St. Mary Mead community, "a young fellow connected with the film industry" (BL, p. 20), who uses the house for hosting weekend parties. When the body of a young girl is discovered in the library of Gossington Hall sprawled across the carpet, everyone agrees that he is the culprit due to his eccentric lifestyle so different from the general conduct of the villagers. Again, outsiders are misjudged and expelled from the village life in order to protect and defend the pseudo immaculate virginity of the town. Outsiders bring changes, and changes are not welcome in St Mary Mead.

For what concerns the geographical location of St Mary Mead, Agatha Christie does not locate it topographically and the map (Figure 4) "does not position the town precisely in relation to real places."[140] It is a strategy employed by the author to create a halo of mystery around the geographical location of her best-known village. St Mary Mead cannot be identified with the real town of Marple on the outskirts of Manchester, in Cheshire – here there

[139] Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000. Detection*, *Death, Diversity.* Basingstoke, UK and New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2004, p. 91.

[140] Marty S. Knepper, "Miss Marple's St. Mary Mead: A Geographical Mystery Solved?". *Clues*, vol. 25, No. 4, Summer 2007, p. 37.

was a manor house, Marple Hall, now converted into a public school, which provided the name of the spinster sleuth but not the location of her hometown. In *The Murder at the Vicarage* St Mary Mead is described as being in the fictional county of Downshire (MV, p. 568) but in the later novel *The Body in the Library* the author has changed Downshire for Radfordshire (BL, p. 67). The towns and cities around it are also given fictional names: Market Basing, Much Benham and Danemouth. However, Christie also intermingles real topographical names together with imagined ones. For example, in *Nemesis*, the narrator informs the readers that St Mary Mead is twelve miles from the coast at Loomouth and twenty-five miles from London and halfway between Loomouth and the town of Market Basing – a recurrent place which appears in many of Agatha Christie's novels and in several Poirot's stories. In *The Body in The Library* the reader is informed that Danemouth, "a large and fashionable watering-place on the coast" (BL, p.29), is about eighteen miles from the county town of Much Benham and twenty miles from St Mary Mead (BL, p.29). These geographical descriptions embedded in the novels have led the scholars to believe that St Mary Mead is to be found somewhere half-way between London and the south coast. The geographical position of St Mary Mead has given birth to a mystery that places the imaginary village in a limbo zone between reality and imagination. The recurrent repetition of the town in Miss Marple's adventures together with its almost-real maps, have contributed to the myth that the town must be somewhere in England, or that probably Dame Christie had a specific place in mind when she created St Mary Mead. In the prologue to *Passenger to Frankfurt* the author gives her definition of geographical setting,

> So, in a sense, you don't have to invent your settings. They are outside you, all around you, in existence – you have only to stretch out your hand and pick and choose. A railway train, a hospital, a London hotel, a Caribbean beach, a country village, a cocktail party, a girls' school. But one thing only applies – they must be there – in existence. Real people, real places. A definite place in time and space.[141]

[141] Agatha Christie, *Passenger to Frankfurt*. New York, NY: Pocket Books 1974, p. viii.

Christie's geographical locale, like the characters, must be real; a real place transmuted into an imaginary one, which still detains numerous features of reality. St Mary Mead can be easily considered as the archetype of every peripheral English town of the 1930s. Away from the chaos of London, life in these villages was marked by the same routines and events, with gossip as the only possible way to escape the endless monotony. In other words, St Mary Mead is more archetypical than real; it presents real aspects typical of the English rural society between the two world wars, hence, it can be identified with every marginal English town.

Although imaginary, the Miss Marple stories are rich in geographical references, whether real or fictitious. There is a regular bus service to the nearest town, known as Much Benham, "two miles away St Mary Mead" (MV, p. 537). This adjacent town of Much Benham is described through the characters' words as being bigger than the little microcosm of St Mary Mead. The town houses a tennis court where Dennis – the vicar's nephew – and his friend Lettice meet their pals and practice sports and it also has the closest hospital. Colonel Bantry goes to Much Benham to meet the other members of the Conservative Association (BL, p. 19) and here in this town, in *The Body in the Library*, Colonel Melchett has his office together with the other Police Headquarters. (BL, p. 26-29). St Mary Mead and London are also well connected. The little station situated in the west end of the High Street, serves a regular train service to London, where trains stop en route to and from London. Griselda, the vicar's wife, and the other spinsters of the village, go to London for their shopping: "Griselda", says the vicar, "had gone to London by the cheap Thursday train" (MV, p. 531). Miss Marple often receives visits from the capital, from her friends – Mrs. McGiliicuddy leaves at 4:50 p.m. from Paddington station in London on a down train heading for St Mary Mead – and from her only nephew, the writer Raymond West.

3.1.2 Maps & Plans in *The Murder at the Vicarage*

The narration of the events within *The Murder at the Vicarage* is conveyed through the employment of three sketches of the main settings. The narrative voice, the vicar Leonard Clement, to make the story clear, provides the readers with not one but three distinctive maps/plans. The formula he employs to justify their presence within the narration, is exactly the same one used by Captain Hastings and Dr Sheppard respectively in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles Court* and in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. "I append a rough sketch here which will be useful in the light of after happenings" (MV, p. 522), the vicar says, drawing the first plan – plan A.

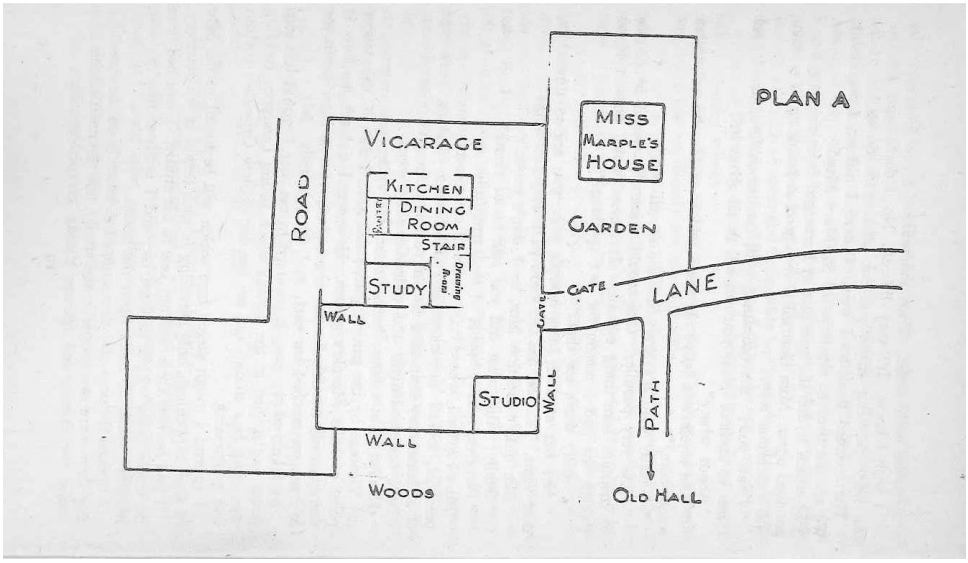

Figure 5 Plan A – The floor plan of the vicarage

Figure 5 immortalizes the ground floor of the vicarage and its relationship to the road, to the connecting paths and lanes and to Miss Marple's house. Through this first plan the narrative voice helps the reader understand the strategic position of Miss Marple's house and garden and their role played in the discovery of the murderer. "It is this central physical position that enables a

panoptic vision across the space"[142] for Miss Marple. It is a panoptic vision that Sarah Martin associates with the idea of power.[143] Hence, Miss Marple, within the story, is the most powerful character – despite her fragile appearance – because the advantageous geographical position of her house and garden provides her with the most reliable view. She visually controls and constantly investigates the space around her and, as it is often said within the narration, Miss Marple sees everything and knows all the secrets of St Mary Mead. Whether in her garden among the roses, or sitting in her rocking chair by the window, Jane Marple is able to maintain the visual control over the village space. Moreover, Plan A makes it clear that Miss Marple will definitively be a fundamental character in the development of the story.

The ground floor of the vicarage consists of a kitchen, a dining room, a drawing room, a central hall with stairs leading to the upstairs room – they are not mentioned – and the vicar's study. The house presents two separate entrances: the first one facing on the main road, while the second by a backyard garden gate facing on the footpath and "the danger point of Miss Marple's garden" (MV, p. 522). The vicar uses the adjective 'danger' for her garden referring to the fact that it is her favourite spot where to observe what is going on in the village. Miss Marple's passion for gardening goes hand in hand with her passion for human nature: "in the art of seeing without being seen, Miss Marple had no rival" (MV, p. 645). The space of the garden is a recurrent characteristic within Christie's geographical milieu. She portrays the English "as a nation of garden-lovers"[144], where Miss Marple embodies the most striking example. The vicarage is also surrounded by a garden – although it is not shown within the Plan A – where there is a little shed which the artist Lawrence Redding is using as a studio. The vicar's study/library, the murder scene, can be accessed by its French windows facing on the garden.

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[142] Sarah Martin, "Psychogeography and the Detective: Re-evaluating the Significance of Space in Agatha Christie's *A Murder is Announced*". *Clues: A Journal of Detection*, vol. 36, No. 1 Spring 2018, p. 25.

[143] Ibidem.

[144] Lisa Hopkins, *Shakespearean Allusion in Crime Fiction*. London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan 2016, p. 43.

As the story unfolds and the investigation begins, the first-person narrator provides the reader with a second plan – plan B, "for the convenience of my readers, I append a sketch plan of the room" (MV, p. 535).

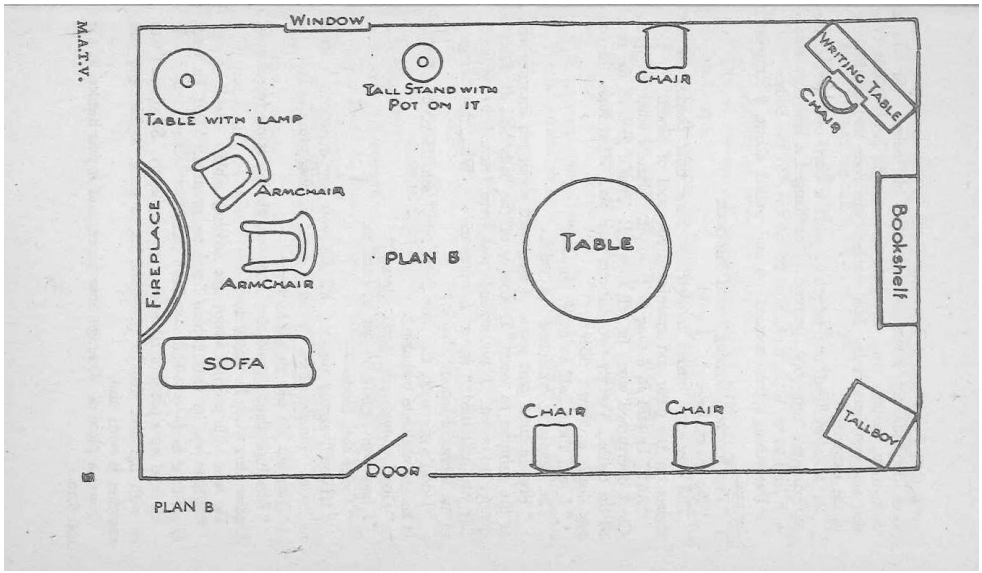

Figure 6 Plan B – The crime scene – the vicar's study

Figure 6 captures the layout of the study of the vicarage, the scene of the murder. As it has been widely discussed in the previous chapter, the study/library is the most dangerous space within Christie's households, an assumption that proves right even in this case. The bizarre thing is that the victim, Colonel Protheroe the owner of the Old Hall, is murdered away from his country house and in the place which, within the village community space where traditions are deep-rooted, plays a pivotal role. The residence of the vicar, together with the church, are commonly regarded as safe places where to find comfort and solace. It is a place where everyone is welcome. All the residents of St Mary Mead confide in the vicar Clement and they regularly visit his house. The reader is informed that the village is so quiet and safe that he never locks the main door. Hence, when Colonel Protheroe arrives at the vicarage and the vicar is not in, the maid invites him to take a seat in the study. Having in mind to write a note, he places himself at the writing table, on the right side of the bookshelf. The homicide inevitably links together the two most

notorious households of the village: that of the vicar Leonard Clement, and the country house of Old Hall, home to wealthy Colonel Protheroe. Whereas life at the vicarage is characterized by a vivid domesticity, life at the Hall is static and unhappy. It is a murder planned in every minimum detail, where time and place/space mingle together. Its solution will be the result of the enigma of the vicar's clock kept a quarter of an hour ahead and the movements of the characters within the circumscribed area depicted in Plan A (figure 5). Moreover, time is a constant presence within the narration, considering that the events are always marked by the strokes of the church clock.

When the story becomes more and more complicated, the vicar Leonard Clement appends a third plan – Plan C – to involve and encourage the reader again in the search for the criminal.

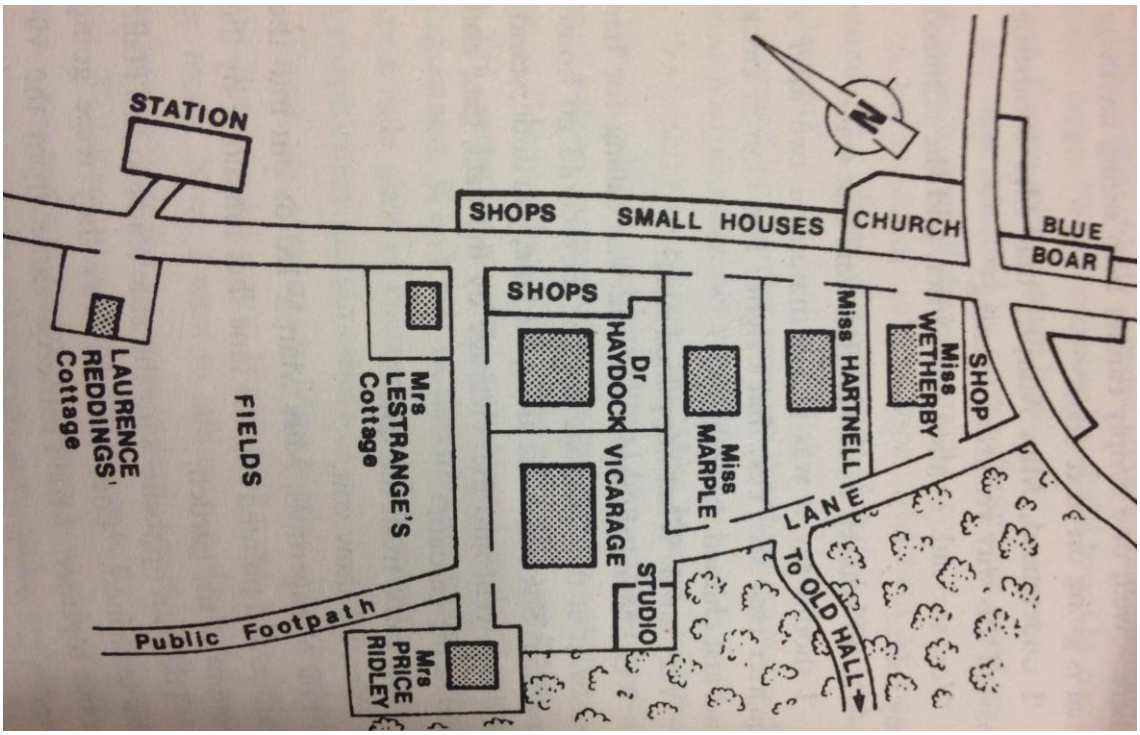

Figure 7 Plan C – Section of the village of St. Mary Mead

This third map represents the entire vicarage neighbourhood, showing several houses, shops, the church, the Blue Boar, the station and their relative position with respect to the vicarage. It is essential for understanding the

movements of the characters involved in the events. Looking at the map, the reader notices that all the roads and footpaths in St Mary Mead converge in the vicarage, placed right in the middle of this map. It is the pivotal centre of action, although a rather peculiar place for a murder. Having two separate entrances – the main door and the back-garden gate – it becomes essential to establish whether the killer has used the main entrance or has entered and left the house through the French windows of the study. Moreover, equally important is the discovery of what route the murderer has walked along, if he/she has arrived from the footpath of the Old Hall, or from the High Street. Of fundamental importance for the discovery of the movements of the characters, is, again, the spatial position of Miss Marple's house, which transforms her into the most reliable witness. As she herself admits during a conversation with Colonel Melchett, the chief constable, "I was in my little garden from five o'clock onwards yesterday, and, of course, from there – well, one simply cannot help seeing anything that is going on next door" (MV, p. 554). What at first sight appears as a nosy spinster devoted to gossip and gardening, is merely a mask Jane Marple wears to support – and mock – the stereotypical image of elderly unmarried women. Her visual control over the village space must be carried out in disguise, because it is her personal and only way to gain information, being a woman who does not "occupy esteemed positions in the social hierarchy."[145] She is often labelled as "the worst cat in the village" (MV, p. 509). However, even in this case, she takes advantage of the opinion villagers have about her and, as an astute cat, sneaks around on soft feet with feline grace and movement within the village space. As a cat, she possesses a unique and wider field of view, which enables her to capture every little movement in the space surrounding her house, not only in the daylight. Being a "nasty old cat" (MV, p. 519), for instance, she can rely on a powerful night vision that facilitates her visual control of the neighbourhood during the darkest hours of the day. Moreover, cats have a strong hunting instinct, the same one Jane Marple has for murderers. Hence, she exploits her total control of the surrounding space

[145] Kimberly Maslin, "The Paradox of Miss Marple: Agatha Christie's Epistemology". *Clues – A Journal of Detection*, vol. 34, No. 1, Spring 2016, p. 108.

and the spatial position of her house and garden for the success of her investigative methods. Her gaze thus becomes the most powerful weapon to search the truth. From 'the worst cat' in the village, she becomes the most astute detective.

3.1.3 The Effects of Time on the Community Space of St Mary Mead

When the microcosm of St Mary Mead appears again in *The Body in the Library*, the reader is already acquainted with its little Georgian houses, the Blue Boar and the vicarage. It is a familiarity that increases the sense of reality and encourages the reader to feel at ease, whether drinking tea in Jane Marple's drawing room or walking along the High Street. However, that almost-imperceptible sense of change perceived in *The Body in the Library* with the introduction of the new building estate – Chatsworth, the latest addition to the town – permeates the narration in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*. The incipit of the novel – a late Christie novel featuring Miss Marple – reveals that the inexorable passing of time has cast his dark shadow over the green expanses of the village. What at first appears to be a world of its own away from the atrocities of the war, from the problems of Europe and where time has stopped, it appears now with all the fragilities typical of the contemporary era.

After the end of World War II, the small rural realities of England underwent a huge modern housing developing. The bombing had largely destroyed entire urban areas and thousands of houses all over the national territory. Hence, the years following the second world conflict were years of reconstruction and, at the same time, years of the housing/building boom – when the capitalist expansion reshaped and destroyed a considerable part of the unspoilt little villages. This uncontrollable building boom turned much of rural England into housing estates and, as the number of citizens moving in the 'newly-built' countryside increased, the process was soon accompanied by the construction of new roads. The impact of those changes on the lives of the

elderly was enormous. Undeniably, they were often among the first to suffer when globalisation and urbanisation rapidly altered the idyllic countryside.

In *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, Christie "causes Miss Marple to register the passage of time and the arrival of new ideas."[146] Now, change has become a particular crucial topic and the quaint little village of St Mary Mead cannot forestall inevitable alterations, as the real rural towns from which Agatha Christie drew her inspiration. Within the narration, the village shows "most of the urban encroachments of post-World War II into rural Britain."[147] The sense of change permeates the story since the very beginning, when an aged Miss Marple contemplates her shabby garden sitting by the window of her drawing room. Her roses are no longer a source of pride and gardening is forbidden to her due to her feeble health, which forces her to spend long hours indoor. The changes in Jane Marple's garden mirror those additional and deeper changes the reader will soon discover in post war St Mary Mead, which has grown from a sleepy village to a modern town.

> One had to face the fact: St Mary Mead was not the place it had been […] You could blame both the wars or the younger generation, or women going out to work, or the atom bomb, or just the Government […] the old core of it, was still there. The Blue Boar was there, and the church and the vicarage and the little nest of Queen Anne and Georgian houses […] fighting progress to the last grasp (TMC, p. 3).

The old core of St Mary Mead – with its little houses – persists. Although the narrative voice informs the reader that their exteriors have remained unchanged, interiors have been modernized and occupied by new people coming from the outside world. Similarly, Mrs Bantry has sold the prominent Gossington Hall to an American film star – film studios have been built in the neighbouring area surrounding St Mary Mead – and "retained for herself the

[146] Marion Shaw & Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple*. London, UK & New York, NY: Routledge 1991 p. 58.

[147] Douglas R. McManis, "Places for Mysteries." Geographical Review, Volume 68, No.3, 1978, p. 322.

East Lodge" (TMC, p. 22). There is even a "glittering new supermarket" (TMC, p.4), which is viewed with suspicion by elderly ladies, including Miss Marple, who enjoy shopping as a form of social interaction. The introduction of the supermarket means no more visits to the butchers, bakers, grocers and the fishmongers for the evening's dinner. Those were the places where the village spinsters used to meet and gossip about the latest happenings. Modernisation together with consumerism are gradually destroying the old villagers' habits.

Similarly, *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* finds the village street – the High Street – undergoing many changes. Some of the shops have been modernized and they are almost unrecognizable with their "new super windows" (TMC, p. 4). Changes, however, do not stop here. Besides the charming old village, there is now a modern neighbourhood of neat well-built houses – what the old ladies refer to as 'the Development' – which encroaches on the very outskirts of St Mary Mead. Moved by the curiosity to see with her own eyes how these modern houses differentiate from the old ones, Miss Marple sets out to discover the latest addition to the town. Hence, the author sends her on a walk through the new part of St Mary Mead sharing the same "feeling of Columbus setting out to discover a new world" (TMC, p. 13). While venturing into this strange country, Miss Marple notices big "television masts and blue and pink and yellow and green painted doors and windows" (TMC, p. 13). Positioned in the most western area of the village, the new housing estate escapes the visual control of Miss Marple. Located too far from the vantage-point of her garden, the Development is completely out of sight. She can no longer control the entire community space, as she has done in previous novels. Hence, the voyage into the 'brave new world' is a strategy she employs to capture visually this unknown area of the village. What she finds there is outwardly attractive yet fills the old lady with a sense of unreality. St Mary Mead is not the place it used to be.

There is no doubt that the Development is treated satirically, especially considering the comparison between Columbus and Jane Marple. Columbus, the Italian explorer, is commonly associated with the discovery of the American continent. In the collective imagination, he is the man who challenged the ocean and went beyond the borders of the then-known world. Miss Marple, like a real

voyager, ventures into an unknown part of the village and observes the behaviours of those people who live there, their clothes, their identical houses and the streets called Closes (TMC, p. 14). The Development is the place where the word 'lounge' has replaced the old-fashioned 'drawing-room', and where hoovers have supplanted the quaint dustpans. However, rather than Columbus, Miss Marple resembles the colonized, those people who have suffered inevitable changes dictated by the ruling class. It is not by chance that she, together with the other women of St Mary Mead, must necessarily adapt to the imposed changes. Doing it, it is a pure survival strategy. Charles Darwin called it 'survival of the fittest', where only those species that acquire adaptations favourable for the environment will survive over time. Miss Jane Marple, thenceforth, must adapt to changes, both social and environmental, to win in the struggle for life.

The nearly identical houses of the Development – that are believed to have all the modern amenities within – occupy the space where once there had been meadows with cows. The inevitable expansion of this new estate epitomises the deterioration of St Mary Mead and it clearly "violates Christie/Marple ideas of *Home*. It stands outside the collective value system of the village proper."[148] Hence, the village little houses with their unique colourful exteriors, pretty gardens and peculiar windows, are the last representative of a world that is now ruled by standardisation, impersonality and anonymity. This new world is strongly unfamiliar to Jane Marple and Christie's idea of Englishness. Nonetheless, it is taking over the community space, where everyone – from the vicar to the fishmonger – used to occupy a specific place during the pre-war and the interwar years. Before the advent of urbanisation, the economic boom and the capitalist expansion, the community space in St Mary Mead was well partitioned. The villagers knew what their place was within that microcosm, depending on their profession and social class. However, with the addition of the residential area to the village, the community space has been violated and divided between people who do their shopping at the supermarket – the newcomers – and people who still depend on the grocer and the butcher

[148] Anna-Marie Taylor, "Home is Where the Heart is", cit., p. 142

– the insiders. The partition between the village old core and the Development becomes more evident when Jane Marple – reflecting with nostalgia on how St Mary Mead used to be – defines the new building estate an "entity of its own" (TMC, p. 4). Undeniably, the Development, with that important capital letter, rather than a peripheral section of the village looks like a town of its own. As the narration goes by and the story unfolds, Miss Marple becomes the human link between the old and the new world.

A completely astonishing redecoration has also transformed the old manor house of Gossington Hall, once the most influential building within the community space. Mrs Bantry, the previous owner, has sold it to the American actress Marina Gregg, after her husband's death. To celebrate the new life given to the house, the actress organizes a fête benefiting a local ambulance company. The social event becomes, for the villagers, the afternoon entertainment to observe how the country house has been modernized. Everyone is willing to pay an extra shilling just to go into the house (TMC, p. 46) and admire "what these 'film people' had done to Gossington Hall" (TMC, p. 45). An American-style swimming pool has been built surrounded by an exotic pavilion and an artificial plantation of hedges and shrubs (TMC, p. 46). Luxuriously tiled bathrooms have been added, the library and the study on the ground-floor have been transformed into one large music room with a huge piano and a big sum of money has been spent on dishwashers and electric cookers.

However, Marina Gregg's unnecessary improvements to the property are completely out of place in St Mary Mead. The surrounding garden – once Mrs Bantry's source of pride and joy – presents excessive dimensions and clashes with the smallness of the classic English garden. Moreover, the artificial plants accentuate the indifference the new owners have towards gardening, an activity that has always fascinated the villagers of St Mary Mead. In fact, their houses are all delimited by a tiny garden, the tangible sign of the British passion for creating green spaces. Likewise, the interiors have "been smartened up" (TMC, p. 34), but Gossington Hall has become unrecognizable, with nothing reminding the traditional role country houses used to have in English villages. It has been deprived of both the role it historically had within St Mary Mead

community space and, at the same time, of its home-function. As a matter of fact, the intimate essence of the house it once used to be has been violated by the eccentricity of the new owners. Due to the excessive and unrequired changes, the villagers perceive Gossington Hall as an attraction and a replica of the film studios based just a few miles away. St Mary Mead becomes the witness that things do change, even in novels.

With its first appearance in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, St Mary Mead introduced itself as a little Eden, the image of a pre-war rural England separated from the rest of Great Britain. In St Mary Mead there was no knowledge and no fear of war, there was no awareness neither of the European totalitarian regimes nor of the immense British Empire that shortly thereafter would collapse. St Mary Mead as a paradise lost, where modernization and progress found no breeding ground. In *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* – the last Miss Marple's novel set in St Mary Mead – the village has become unrecognizable, a demonstration that Christie's novels are influenced – although only to a limited extent – by the social preoccupations of her time. In the post-war decades "the village-green mythology of Englishness was becoming absurd"[149], as Julian Symons has pointed out:

> by the end of World War II the reassurances offered by the classical kind of detective story had become very shaky indeed. The social and religious structure of society had changed so much that its assumptions seemed preposterous. The pretence that the world was static could no longer be maintained.[150]

The stereotype of England as a fairy-tale green land is fading away rapidly. Hence, if at first glance devoted readers perceived the village of St Mary Mead as a place where to escape from the brutalities of a violent era – crime fiction, indeed, was regarded as a highly diversionary reading and as a reassuring genre – with the advent of the 1960s, St Mary Mead undergoes a process of radical changes. Thus, in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* the village is not the same

[149] Neil McCaw, *Adapting Detective Fiction: Crime, Englishness and the TV Detectives,* cit., p. 47
[150] Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel – a History*. London, UK: Pan Books 1992, p. 25.

stable little entity seen in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. This is the reason why Christie writes about new houses for the working class – the infamous Development – she describes new people living in the countryside – including American actors – she faces the problem of country houses being sold and renovated and the standardisation of the local shops to the consumerism. The reader, as Miss Marple, can do nothing but passively accept changes. One thing, however, has remained identical. Jane Marple's house, the emblem of the past days, is still there as it has been immortalized by Christie's pen, winning over the flowing of time. The reader knows where to go for the afternoon tea.

3.2 The City of London

While Miss Marple-the insider dominates the narratives set in marginal English villages – her murders are Mayhem Parva murders[151], although there are very few exceptions – Hercule Poirot-the outsider is the unquestioned master of those accounts set in the city of London – and of those set abroad, as it will be discussed in chapter 4.

Urban spaces and mystery tales have always constituted a perfect alliance. From Edgar Allan Poe and his Dupin's short stories set in Paris, to the contemporary adventures of the American female private detective V.I. Warshawski set in Chicago, the fascination of the dangerous city has teased the imagination of several writers. The charm is even more attractive when the city in question is universally known for its grey atmosphere. For instance, there is nothing better than a foggy city for a locale of a crime novel. London's mysterious back alleys, in particular, wail for detection. Sherlock Holmes knows the obscure entity of this city, when in his Victorian London straddling the XIX and the XX century, his residence in Baker Street exemplifies the only secure spot within the threatening city. It is no surprise that London, during the XVIII century, saw the establishment of the first "specialists in criminal-catching […]

[151] Cfr. Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 97.

known as 'Bow Street Runners'"[152], the ancestors of the modern-day detectives. One hundred years later in the fall of 1888, the first modern serial killer, Jack the Ripper, terrorized the Victorian capital by murdering several prostitutes in the impoverished areas in and around the Whitechapel district. The Ripper crimes epitomise how dangerous walking was in the disreputable areas of Victorian London, already affected by unemployment, overcrowding, disease and poor hygiene conditions. Life was completely different between the prosperous suburbs of the respectable London and the poor slums, where the death rate was very high. These conflicts deepened the gap between rich and bourgeois citizens and poor Londoners, transforming the entire Victorian era, and, therefore, the capital of the massive British Empire, as an enormous Janus, the two-faced Roman god. The combination London-detective stories continued when in the interwar years a great deal of detective fiction was set here, as Colin Watson explains, "London and its society fascinated a public which was both static and conscious of its provincialism."[153]

However, seedy districts and homicidal serial killers do not inhabit the London depicted in Agatha Christie's narratives. Differing from the previous crime writers, Christie writes neither about the unpleasant realities of the capital nor about its social problems, although it was a reality she knew very well. As a matter of fact, "she visited the city often as a child, lived there after World War I and then again during World War II and, and in later years maintained a flat in Chelsea."[154] In particular, during the years of the second world conflict, she personally chose to live in London to be near her husband, Max Mallowan, who, at that time, was working at the Air Ministry.[155] However, when he was sent abroad as a "colonial administrator"[156], Christie remained in dangerous London, witnessing the air raids, the devastating bombing and the rationing of food. Nonetheless, the London novels set during the bloody years

[152] Stephen Knight, *Crime Fiction 1800-2000*, cit., pp. 9-10.
[153] Colin Watson, Snobbery with Violence, cit., p. 193
[154] Maida & Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, cit., p. 178
[155] Cfr. Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*. New York, NY: The Free Press 1992, p. 149.
[156] Ibidem, p. 150.

of the war do not reflect the difficult reality of those days, the destruction and the sufferings. As Gillian Gill has stated in the Christie's biography she wrote, the author "used her fiction to shut out the cold and the gloom and the sorrow not only for herself but for the thousands of her readers."[157] Hence, Conan Doyle's gloomy London is nowhere to be found in Christie's London narratives that, at the same time, do not provide an historical account of the devastation the city suffered during the difficult years of World War II.

Similarly, Christie's magnifying glass avoids descriptions of London magnificent sights that regularly attract millions of tourists from all over the world. Her characters move easily around the city but none of them is struck by the beauty of Tower Bridge, by the grandiosity of the Big Ben or by the elegance of Buckingham Palace. She focuses, once more, on the private nature of domestic scenes, this time set in gorgeous apartments, richly-furnished houses and posh hotels. Thus, London becomes, rather than an urban space, the epitome of an upper-class privileged way of life. The British capital in Christie's detective novels, for instance, is usually associated with aristocratic characters and is described only through their comfortable lives and the interiors of their homes, rather than through real topographical landmarks.[158] It is no surprise that the eccentric and wealthy Hercule Poirot – when he is not travelling around the world solving the most convoluted cases – lives in London. Unlike Miss Marple, who leads a modest life in her home town of St Mary Mead, the Belgian-born detective has made London his new home.

Though the metropolis offers many "opportunities for scenic development in solving the murders"[159], Christie relies on the same pattern once again: the closed circle of suspects – the so-called 'house party'. However, unlike those stories set in 'Mayhem Parva' or in isolated country houses, much more dynamism and movement characterize the London narratives: the characters move from one locale to another, but no attention is given neither to the surrounding beauties of London, nor to the dangerous crimes happening

[157] Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, cit., p. 152.
[158] Cfr. Maida & Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, cit., p. 179.
[159] Earl Bargainnier, *The Gentle Art of Murder*, cit., p. 27.

in the city. In order to convey Christie's treatment of the London scene, three novels will be discussed in the following subchapters. Two of them, *Lord Edgware Dies* and *Cards on the Table* are among Poirot's most brilliant cases. And, last but not least, attention will be devoted to Miss Marple's London adventure in *At Bertram's Hotel*, where an elderly Miss Marple will find herself involved in an awful business and she will witness a case of homicide.

3.2.1 London as a Privileged Lifestyle: *Lord Edgware Dies* and *Cards on the Table*

"I confess it—that I am a little proud of my moustaches. Nowhere in London have I observed anything to compare with them."[160] Hercule Poirot, boasting about the uniqueness of his unmistakable moustaches, circumscribes the space of the story of the novel *Lord Edgware Dies* within the city of London, his adoptive city. Nearly all the events take place within the confines of London, except for two scenes that are set in a wealthy family house on the river Thames at Chiswick (LED, p. 111), a district of West London. None among the characters leaves the city, apart from Inspector Japp, who takes a trip outside the country, to Paris. Rather than presenting London as a real geographical setting, the story deals with the social milieu made of aristocrats and eccentric actresses.[161] Hence, as it has been previously mentioned, the city is constructed through the prosperous lives of the main characters, their private homes in upper-class districts such as Kensington, Grosvenor Square, Regent Gate, the London theatres, a lot of fancy restaurants and posh hotel rooms.

The narration begins in an unspecified London theatre and shifts to the luxurious Savoy hotel, "the first great London hotel featuring a private

[160] Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies*. Retrieved November 2017 from http://www.educatora.in/uploads/2/0/5/1/20513864/lord_edgware_dies_by_agatha_christie.pdf , p. 8
All the subsequent references to the novel will be to this e-book and only page numbers will be given in parentheses following the quotations in the main text.

[161] Cfr. Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 196

bathroom in each room"[162], where Poirot and Hastings, the first-person narrator, go for their dinner after the end of a theatrical performance they watched together (LED, p. 7). The Savoy hotel detains a special place within Christie's oeuvre. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, the American millionaire Rufus Van Aldin stays at the Savoy, the choice of well-off people visiting London. In *The Big Four* Hastings plays the part of the secretary, following Poirot's advice, for a rich American. In *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side*, the Savoy appears again as the temporary residence of another American wealthy character, the film star Lola Brewster. The relationship between rich Americans and the Savoy is employed again in *Lord Edgware Dies*, where the American actress Jane Wilkinson has chosen "the most opulent of the Savoy suites" (LED, p. 11) for her London residence. It is a suite that matches with her eccentricity, with the white fur she usually wears and her small jewelled bag (LED, p. 11).

The space of the narration branches into other luxurious locales. The first victim, the Lord Edgware of the title, lives in Regent Gate in an imposing house "well-built, handsome and gloomy" (LED, p. 29). He meets Poirot and Hastings in his library/studio, a room where the "walls were lined with books, the furnishings were dark and sombre but handsome, the chairs were formal and not too comfortable" (LED, p. 29). The house and the library mirror the gloomy personality of the owner, a wealthy but cruel man. It is inside the library – that proves to be, once again, the most dangerous space within Christie's fictional houses – that he is murdered. It is an action that appears completely out of place, according to Miss Carroll, Lord Edgware's secretary, who believes that such cruel things do not happen "to anyone in our class of life" (LED, p. 59).

Sir Montagu Corner's house on the river Thames is a luxurious villa in the Chiswick district. It is "a big house standing back in its own grounds" (LED, p. 111) filled with "exquisite examples of art and culture" (LED, p. 112) coming from different corners of the world. Its owner speaks "of Japanese prints, of Chinese lacquer, of Persian carpets, of the French Impressionists, of modern music and of the theories of Einstein" (LED, p. 111). He could be easily identified

[162] Judith Hurdle, *The Getaway Guide to Agatha Christie's England*. Oakland, CA: RDR Books 1999, p. 56.

with "a wealthy art enthusiasts and patrons of young artists and actors."[163] This house-museum, in fact, is the place where artists gather together under Sir Montagu's protective wings and, at the same time, it is the personification of his profound passion for artworks. Life in London is evidently poles apart from the monotonous life in both St Mary Mead and in the other fictional Mayhem Parva communities. While villagers in St Mary Mead meet at the vicar' house for the famous 'tea and scandal at 4:30', or, like in King's Abbot, they gather together for an evening card game, in London wealthy people go to theatres, to candle-light evening dinner parties, discuss about art, literature, Persian carpets and buy custom-made hats at fashionable shops. Jenny Driver's hat-shop in Moffat Street, just off Bond Street (LED, p. 71) is the place where the extravagant taste of well-off people is fully satisfied.

Similarly, fancy restaurants appear as central locales for the development of the narration. The refined Poirot and the faithful Hastings dine in a small bistro in Dover Street (LED, p. 78) and in a posh restaurant in Soho (LED, p. 106), demonstrating, once more, the importance food has within Christie's oeuvre. Food conveys the idea that Poirot is not a superhuman hero and his wisdom towards the smallest details – like food – makes him even more human and close to his readers. Living in London, he knows the best places where to dine. Undoubtedly, he is a connoisseur of culinary delicacies. For what concerns his private residence, several scenes are set within his home including the closing one, but there are no descriptions about it and Poirot does not specify where it is located. Certainly, he is not living in Whitehaven Mansion – "the newest type of service flats in London"[164] he has chosen "entirely on account of its strictly geometrical appearance and proportions" and its "most pleasing symmetry" (ABCM, p. 1) – considering that he will move there in the novel *The A.B.C. Murders*. The name of this residence changes in two different occasions: it becomes Whitehouse Mansions in *Cat Among the Pigeons* and, later, Whitefriars Mansions in *Elephants Can Remember.*

[163] James Zemboy, *The Detective Novels of Agatha Christie*, cit., p. 77.

[164] Agatha Christie, *The ABC Murders*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2006, p. 1.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

The space of the novel is constantly in motion, due to the fact that Poirot is always moving around London, enriching the narration with great dynamism. For instance, there is often a repetition of street names and specific places to convey the idea that Poirot shifts from one place to another. He passes through Regent Street, Bond Street, St George's Road, Tottenham Court Road, he goes to the Covent Garden Opera House, to Euston station, to Grosvenor Square, to Convent Garden but, in the end, the action concludes within the enclosed space of his drawing room. His 'little grey cells' have made him stroll around London in search for the truth. However, when every piece of the puzzle has been put into its original place, Poirot drives the action towards the intimacy of his residence – or any other bounded place – within the place he can better control. The same thing occurs again in *Cards on the Table*: the story of the investigation is marked by Poirot's wanderings around and outside London. He goes to Lancaster Gate, South Kensington, he travels to Chelsea, he walks through Regent Street, and he visits Wallingford and expensive shops. In the end, his actions come together in the comfortable space of his drawing-room.

Likewise, wealthy characters and exclusive homes inhabit Christie's London in *Cards on the Table*. The initial scene sees Poirot in an art gallery called Wessex House, in London, where an exhibition of snuffboxes is taking place "in aid of the London hospitals."[165] Poirot's attention is soon attracted by Mr Shaitana's moustache, "the only moustache in London, perhaps, that could compete" (COT, p. 10) with his. Mr Shaitana, an art collector, lives "richly and beautifully in a super flat in Park Lane" (COT, p. 11), in London. His luxurious apartment is meticulously furnished with expensive objects coming from all over the world. There are Persian rugs, Chinese cabinets, Japanese prints, silver objects, ivory figures and precious pictures at the walls (COT, p. 113). The place matches with the extravagant and grotesque personality of his occupant, a strange man who, in more than one occasion, is described as "a modern Mephistopheles" (COT, p. 104). He dresses up as the devil to frighten people. In fact, his favourite hobby is to collect murderers, but only "the ones who have

[165] Agatha Christie, *Cards on the Table.* London, UK: HarperCollins 2010, p. 10.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

got away with it" (COT, p. 13). His house is as excessive as the 'queer' parties he hosts, but it is a house that does not protect Mephistopheles from the murderous plans of one of his guests. During a card-playing party, he is stabbed in his own drawing-room with a jewelled knife stolen from his private collection, while sitting in a big chair by the fireplace (COT, p. 31). Home, as it always happens in Christie' s oeuvre, does not provide protection. Home becomes a place of violence to escape from (see chapter 2). Mr Shaitana's queer personality and his eccentric physical appearance reinforce his status as an outsider. The other characters do not know where he comes from and his country of origin has always been a mystery to the Londoners. Whether he is "an Argentine, or a Portuguese, or a Greek, or some other nationality rightly despised by the insular Briton, nobody knew" (COT, p. 11).

Both in *Lord Edgware Dies* and in *Cards on the Table*, "Christie's presentation of the London scene is highly filtered."[166] For instance, London is constructed as a social milieu and it merely appears as the place where eccentric representatives of the bourgeois upper-class live. There is no reference to real London, the one made of slums, street crimes and chaos. Therefore, the urban spaces disappear and interiors become the main settings of the stories. While in St Mary Mead houses are furnished in a modest way, in London the bounded settings are refined and rich in frivolities. No scene is set in the real outside world and all the characters live in respectable districts. Thus, the reader becomes aware of the outside world only through Poirot's wanderings around London. However, many places he visits are fictional. In fact, the London detective novels contain references to both real places – such as Covent Garden, Soho – but also to imaginary places and streets – such as Moffat Street and Regent Gate.

As Ernest Mandel contends, "the common ideology of the original and classical detective story […] remains quintessentially bourgeois."[167] Christie's accounts set in London are the emblem of a privileged and bourgeois lifestyle and her wealthy characters enjoy the amusements the city offers: theatres, art

[166]Maida & Spornick, *Murder She Wrote*, cit., p. 178

[167] Ernest Mandel, *Delightful Murder: A Social History of the Crime Story*, cit., p. 57.

galleries and expensive bistros. There is no place for poverty, slums and real crimes. For those – Christie knew it well – there is the hard-boiled detective fiction.

3.2.2 Nostalgia and Edwardian London: *At Bertram's Hotel*

The only Miss Marple's adventure set in London is the late novel *At Bertram's Hotel*, where the elderly sleuth is spending her two-week vacation. However, London is somehow absent from the narration. The story takes place within the enclosed space of the fictitious Bertram's hotel and only few scenes are set outside in the open streets. The peculiarity of this location lays in the fact that the Bertram's Hotel of the title embodies, somehow, Edwardian London and England. In the heart of the West End, in the quiet 'Pond Street' just off Piccadilly, the reader can find the eternal Bertram's Hotel.

> Bertram's has been there a long time. During the war, houses were demolished on the right of it […] but Bertram's itself remained unscathed […] by 1955 it looked precisely as it had looked in 1939 […] Bertram's too had had to change, but it had been done so cleverly that it was not at all apparent at the first casual glance.[168]

Bertram's seems frozen in time. It is still the same place Jane Marple visited for the first time when she was a teenager, as she asserts "takes me back a long way, coming here. Nothing seems to have changed" (ABT, p. 438). Survived from World War II bombing and destruction, it has detained the original beauty of "a vanished world" (ABH, p. 345). There, time has stopped so that miss Marple – and the other guests – feel in Edwardian England once more (ABH, p. 345).

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[168] Agatha Christie, *At Bertram's Hotel*. Miss Marple Omnibus. London, UK: HarperCollins 1997, p. 345.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

Old London is felt everywhere within the Bertram's hotel enclosed space, from the food to the furniture and from the hospitality to the service. The traditional ritual of the afternoon tea has not gone out of fashion at the hotel, which is the only place in the entire city where "real muffins" are served (ABH, p. 347). It is the best hotel in London where to get a real English breakfast, with "old-fashioned seed cake and proper eggs" (ABH, p. 373), where they still serve "all the old English dishes" (ABH, p. 349). For what concerns the interior decoration, the space is embellished with Victorian antiques and "Edwardian amenities" (ATB, p. 346). For instance, the armchairs are not "of this time and age" (ABH, p. 345), rose-flowered wallpapers cover the bedrooms' walls and two magnificent coal fires stand in the big central lounge. The hotel still defends the traditional English culture against the advancing force of consumerism and standardization. In the midst of the revolutions of the 1960s, the hotel represents the only surviving emblem of a vanishing world. Thus, those strangers who expect to find the same London read in the Henry James' novels, choose to stay at Bertram's Hotel to revive the myth of old England. "It's just like stepping back a hundred years" (ABT, p. 349).

The opposition between the bounded space of the hotel and the outer space of the city plays a crucial role in the narration. The main entrance appears to be as the only connection between the open streets and the intimacy of the inner space. Indeed, the hotel with its Edwardian atmosphere seems a secure place from the increasing crimes of the outside city. Crimes, indeed, are "numerally growing" (ABH, p. 366) but they do not seem to worry the aging aristocrat guests of the hotel, a place which is constructed as a microcosm of-its-own, away from the desolate realities of those years. There is neither reference to the Cold War, to the Communist threat and nor to the fear of the atomic bomb – although one character mentions "the long-haired Beatles" (ABH, p. 364). When Miss Marple arrives at the hotel, she is struck by the old-fashioned charms typical of an England of sixty years earlier. However, she soon perceives that the entire place is constructed as a big theatrical show.[169] The exaggerated attention to the last detail conveys the unsettling idea that

[169] Cfr. James Zemboy, *The Detective Novels of Agatha Christie*, cit., p. 354.

everything within the confines of the hotel space is unnatural and strongly prearranged. Its elderly guests, moreover, reflect the unreality of the setting. For instance, in the closing remarks, the dichotomy safe inner space and dangerous open streets crushes when Scotland Yard discovers that the hotel is being used by a criminal gang as a cover-up for bank and train robberies: "Bertram's is the headquarters of one of the biggest crime syndicates that's been known for years" (ABH, p. 494). Therefore, the bounded space of the hotel is just apparently constructed as a safe harbour. Behind the confines of its respectful façade the hotel hides sin, corruption and criminals. It conveys a false sense of security. Canon Pennyfather, one of its guests, is attacked within the pseudo-secure hotel space and illegal actions are planned within its walls. As it usually happens with Christie's bounded settings, "close confines, much as they may be wished for […] have a habit of turning into torture chambers or scenes of murder"[170], says David Lehman. This successful pattern is employed again in *At Bertram's Hotel*, where, once more, the interior space proves to be as blood soaked as the most dangerous city streets.

London open streets, on the contrary, are depicted as extremely dangerous and chaotic places – although no scenes are set in disreputable quarters – and, also, as the space of nostalgia where to recollect memories of old times. For Jane Marple, London is a trip into the past. Indeed, she avoids the wide cultural opportunities the city offers and she does not visit neither picture galleries nor museums (ABH, p. 411). Except for a visit to Madame Tussauds, she schedules her London excursion in two separate routes: shopping at the Army & Navy Stores – Christie's great-aunt and grandmother's favourite shop – and at glass and china departments, and revisiting scenes of her youth only to find that the houses she once remembered, have now been replaced by modern flats and skyscrapers (ABH, p. 411). Thus, nostalgia pervades the urban space and it is the same feeling Jane Marple senses when, in St Mary Mead, the wave of progress has defamiliarised the once familiar village space. At the same time, London open streets also denote how dangerous the urban space can appear.

[170] David Lehman, *The Perfect Murder: A Study in Detection*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press 1998, p. 75.

In fact, the traffic and the fog – a constant factor of the British metropolis – increase the feeling of disorientation that the character perceives when walking outside the hotel. Miss Marple, during a shopping expedition around the city, buys "a small guide to buses and their roots and an Underground Transport map" (ABH, p. 411), unifying what W.H. Auden defines rituals of time (timetables) and rituals of space (map).[171] The map, to quote Robert Tally, "is one of the most powerful and effective means humans have to make sense of their place in the world."[172] In *Spatiality,* the American writer declares that humans need maps to contrast the persistent condition of disorientation "that appears to be part of our fundamental being-in-the-world."[173] Eleonora Rao underscores that maps provide "a spatial and visual understanding of places, events, and processes."[174] In fact, maps offer a representation of the world and a solution to being misplaced. "The human condition is […] fundamentally one of 'not being at home'", Tally accentuates, a condition accompanied by spatial confusion and bewilderment that have increased, according to Tally, with the postmodern era, when the traditional beliefs of borders and space have completely vanished. The same sense of disorientation is experienced by the brave Miss Marple when leaving the comforts of the bounded space of the hotel. The map she purchases gives her "a sense of direction and order"[175] in a London ruled by chaos and bewilderment.

London threatening open streets function as the background to the most crucial scene of the novel – the assassination of the hotel porter, just outside the fog-bound hotel. The night of the murder everything is excessively quiet in Pond Street. The noise of the traffic is muted, few cars cross the empty streets, and the buses have just stopped running. The calm before the storm. There is one thing, however, that increases the sense of disorientation and the feeling

[171] Cfr. W.H. Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage: Notes on the Detective Story by an Addict". *Harper's Magazine,* May 1948, p. 408.

[172] Robert Tally, *Spatiality*, cit., p. 2.

[173] Ibidem, p. 1.

[174] Christine Lorre-Johnston & Eleonora Rao, eds., *Space and Place in Alice Munro's Fiction*. Rochester, NY: Camden House 2018, p. 6

[175] Gillian Mary Hanson, *City and Shore: The Function of Setting in the British Mystery*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Company Publishers 2004, p. 89.

that something mysterious is about to happen. “The fog had come down over London suddenly that evening […] (it) had been patchy to begin with, had almost cleared, then had deepened again” (ABH, p. 450). Few moments later this apparently peaceful area of London – outside the Edwardian Bertram’s Hotel – becomes the site for murder. “The screaming – a woman’s – was piercing the midst with a note of terror. Chief-Inspector Davy raced down Pond Street in the direction of the screams” (ABH, p. 458). Standing in the fog there is a petrified figure of a young woman – Elvira Blake – and the lifeless body of a man sprawled on the pavement. The murderer is nowhere to be found. The fog has aided his escape.

Symbolically, the fog casts upon the city landscape the air of elusiveness and it heightens the deceptiveness of the urban wilderness. It is a natural phenomenon that cannot be controlled, it is mysterious and unpredictable. The fog is the representation of impersonality; the space it embraces becomes anonymous and unrecognizable. In a fog-ridden world every man is a stranger to others. The contours fade, the details blur. Hence, the fog becomes that imperceptible border between reality and unreality, between the seen and the unseen. In *At Bertram’s Hotel*, the nasty fog thickens as the mystery becomes more intricate. It clusters around the hotel revealing its deceptive sense of security – it is not accidental that the murder weapon is found near the hotel’s grounds, “in an area in Pond Street which […] is a street near Park Lane” (ABH, p. 479). The fog becomes the physical manifestation of the ineffable ambiguities surrounding the hotel. It metaphorically accentuates both the sense of the unknown and of the mystery, and, moreover, it conveys the idea of blindness that dominates the novel – the density of the fog, for instance, hides things from view. Similarly, the hotel “old-fashioned guests” are passive and blind characters: they fail to comprehend the wicked plans organised within the fog-ridden hotel. Thus, the outside fog bordering the area occupied by the hotel becomes the emblem of the characters’ confusion. It totally obscures their vision. “It seemed wonderful at first […] like stepping back into the past […] that one had loved and enjoyed” (ABH, p. 456). Miss Marple recognises that there is something theatrical behind the beautiful façade of the hotel and she soon discovers that it is a cover-up for an organized gang of criminals. “It’s been a

good racket […] well planned, beautifully executed. But nothing lasts forever" (ABH p. 494). When in the end the mystery is solved, the fog clears out and the brutal truth shines bright in the daylight. The fog, which naturally changes the outward appearances of the environment, has hidden the truth from Scotland Yard: "the honourable Elvira Blake" (ABH, p. 380) has killed the hotel's porter.

Whereas in the countryside villages Miss Marple is constructed as a static character, in *At Bertram's Hotel* she is more dynamic than ever. Her shopping trips take her around London crossing Bond Street, Trafalgar Square, Battersea Park, Chelsea Bridge, and stopping to dine in several restaurants. Food and the enclosed space of the restaurants are, even in this case, part of the entire setting. While the Bertram's hotel is described as unreal and nothing more than a "beautiful performance" (ABH, p. 495), food is employed to give a sense of reality to the narration. On two different occasions Miss Marple dines outside the hotel: at the Army and Navy Stores restaurant and in a small tea enclosure on the edge of the Battersea Park lake. Within the novel, the bounded space of the restaurant denotes the place where the intrigues concerning the hotel and new robberies are discussed and planned. While ordering lunch at the Army and Navy Stores, Miss Marple notices Bess Sedgwick – one of the hotel's gests – together with her lover, a race car driver, in a table next to hers. Eventually she will be unmasked as the head of the Bertram's hotel criminal syndicate. "The boss of the syndicate, the brains that run it, and plan it, are your brains, Lady Sedgwick" (ABH p. 498). The scene is repeated in a small restaurant in Battersea Park, where Miss Marple notices the same race car driver but this time with Bess Sedgwick's estranged daughter, Elvira Blake. Ultimately, the young girl is discovered to be the hotel's porter's assassin. Both these meetings, Miss Marple is sure, are secret meetings, away from the curious eyes of the Bertram's hotel aristocratic guests. These clandestine assignments anticipate the violent chain of events that will eventually lead to the climax of the story: the discovery of the hotel's illegal purposes.

The real London, the gigantic metropolis with breath-taking sights, is totally absent from the narration to a point that the city itself becomes merely the implicit background in those detective novels set in the urban space. Due the author's voluntary decision to avoid real descriptions of the city, London, in

Christie's novels, is made of large department stores, stylish restaurants, posh hotels and luxurious apartments, a bigger – and wealthier – version of St Mary Mead.

Chapter 4

“How Much I Loved that Part of the World”: Agatha Christie and the Middle East

Chapter 4
Debora Sarnelli

Introduction

The following chapter aims at exploring how the Orient is portrayed in Agatha Christie's novels set outside the national borders of Great Britain, but within the vast colonial Empire, on which the sun never sets. The research investigates three novels commonly labelled as "colonial": *Death on the Nile*, *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *Appointment with Death*. The only Christie's historical novel – *Death Comes as the End* – is also analysed in the framework of this chapter since the story takes place in ancient Egypt.

4.1 The Itinerant Christie

Agatha Christie's long-life passion for country houses goes hand in hand with her passion for the Orient, a love she has shared together with her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan. During her life, she has often visited the Middle East for pleasure. In her *Autobiography*, she recalls the first trip to Cairo when, still an adolescent, her widowed mother chose the relatively cheap Egyptian city as the perfect place for the "coming out" of her daughter. Due to the precarious financial situation of her family after the sudden death of her father, the debutante season in London was far too expensive. "Coming out was a thing of great importance in a girl's life" (AB, p. 166); it meant her formal entrance in the upper-class society. During the three months in Cairo – at that time Egypt was part of the immense British Empire – the young Christie cared little for museums and antiquities. "Cairo, from the point of view of a young girl, was a dream of a delight" (AB, p. 168) she admits in her *Autobiography*. Young men, polo and dances were her main distractions. "Mother tried to broaden my mind by taking me occasionally to the Museum, and also suggested we should go up the Nile and see the glories of Luxor. I protested passionately with tears in my eyes […] The wonders of antiquity were the last thing I cared to see" (AB, pp. 170-171). Though the three months she spent in Cairo did not result in a husband, Christie still loved the lively time spent there. She would explore Egypt and its antique beauties in adulthood more than twenty years later, a journey which would inspire *Death on the Nile*, as well as the historical novel *Death Comes as the End* and other several short stories.

After her mysterious ten days disappearance and the clamorous divorce from Archie her first husband, Christie decides to take some time for herself travelling on her own around the Middle East. She books a last-minute trip on the Orient Express for Baghdad, a place, she writes, "that I had never thought of going to, so it held for me all the pleasures of the unknown" (AB, p. 362). The Orient represents for Christie a place where she can test herself and, at the same time, where she can find her real self. "I had been round the world with Archie [...] Now I was going *by myself*. I should find out now what kind of person

I was—whether I had become entirely dependent on other people as I had feared" (AB, p. 362). The Middle East marks a new starting point in her life, away from the drama of her first marriage. At Ur, where the author goes driven by the curiosity to see "Leonard Woolley's marvellous finds" (AB, p. 361), she meets the prominent British archaeologist Max Mallowan, soon to become her second husband. The two have travelled together in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon and Christie often helped with his work—even cleaning off ancient ivory carvings and vessels.

Her travels with Mallowan around the Orient resulted in many novels with Middle Eastern settings. However, she is not the only one to employ them among the Golden Age writers. In fact, after the development of the whodunit genre many crime fiction authors set their plots in foreign countries "to add spice to the script"[176] and enrich the stories with more exotic flavours. Generally, Christie's novels written during the 1930s are regarded as "colonial".[177] It is a prolific decade for the author – indeed after the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* her fame reached every angle of the globe – a decade characterised by "the pleasures of travel".[178] Poirot takes the reader outside the British national borders, but within the immense colonial Empire. Her 'colonial' novels play on a double level: what Christie captures is a combination between bourgeois western tourism around the near East and her passion for the science of archaeology. As a matter of fact, the author sheds a light on the progresses reached by archaeology after the end of the First World War, which encouraged the flourishing of a new tourism around excavation sites. Moreover, "travels between the wars became […] more accessible to the majority"[179] and more people experienced the possibility to admire with their own eyes the beauties of the world.

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[176] Reeva Spector Simon, *Spies and Holy Wars: The Middle East in 20th Century Crime Fiction*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press 2010, p. 5.

[177] Phyllis Lassner, "The Mysterious New Empire: Agatha Christie's Colonial Murders", in *At Home and Abroad in the Empire: British Women Write the 1930s*, eds. Robin Hackett, Freda Hauser & Gay Wachman. Newark, NY: University of Delaware Press 2009, p. 33

[178] Alison Light, *Forever England*, cit., p. 89

[179] Alison Light, *Forever England*, cit., p. 89

The Middle East accounts of the 1930s do not differ from those novels set in country houses or in the English country side. The construction of the plot follows the same pattern: a group of people isolated from the rest of the world. However, the Oriental narratives strengthen this sense of isolation at the heart of Christie's fiction. In fact, in her 'colonial' novels the Occidental characters are located in an exotic unfamiliar place with no contact with the civilised Europe. Hence, the representation of the enclosed space finds its best expression in those novels with an Eastern background, where the isolation the characters experience is essentially a spatial isolation. Whether on board a Nile cruise, in an expedition house or in the Arabian desert, every locale is constructed as an English country house or as a larger version of an English drawing-room. Christie's abroad fiction still focuses on the domestic side of the murder. The enclosed circle creates the same intimacy that is found within the walls of a country house. Although those isolated groups are made of strangers, in the end they always constitute a sort of family forced to share the same spaces. Moreover, Poirot eventually discovers secret relations between the various characters. It is within the intimacy of those enclosed spaces that the murderer acts. Hence, abroad is not intended as an adventurous locale, but it is constructed, to quote Alison Light, as "a home from home".[180] Christie's Oriental mysteries are pervaded by the same anxieties that characterise her home writings. The bounded space, whether in Great Britain or in the Middle East, offers neither refuge nor protection.

The characters that inhabit the Oriental accounts share the same features of those characters found in Christie's home and village writings. They are wealthy representatives of the upper-middle-class of Europe and of the United States, two places that deeply incarnate the Western power. In fact, the Middle East novels are constructed on a double dichotomy: on one side the wealthy occidentals who travel around the near East and occupy the highest roles within the narration, and on the other side the native people who are constantly treated as 'others' and relegated to peripheral roles. The European and American characters embody the supposed superiority of the West against the

[180] Ibidem, p. 90.

backwardness of the East. Agatha Christie's 'colonial' narratives were written during an extremely racist epoch. Those were the years when Adolf Hitler gradually promoted racism through legitimate anti-Semitic and racial laws. In Italy, the fascist government launched anti-Semitic and anti-racial politics, allowing authorities to systematically discriminate against Jews. In Great Britain, the colonies belonging to the Empire were perceived as irrational, inferior and uncivilised. Living in a racist society, Agatha Christie's Middle East accounts show traces of racism. Her western characters often make racist comments and misjudge the native people, showing themselves as the bearers of the Englishness of the mother-country. The most common feature of the Golden Age detective fiction is, to quote Susan Rowland, "the projection of Englishness through an overtly Orientalising psyche".[181] The characters' racist attitude towards the homogenised oriental other reinforces the Englishness at the heart of Christie's fiction. In the same way as "the Orient has helped to define Europe"[182] – according to Edward Said's arguments – the British colonies around the globe have helped to define the Englishness of the mother country. Their otherness, in fact, has shown what the 'civilised' motherland – and the Occident in general – is supposed not to be: violent, irrational, dirty and underdeveloped. The fear of the other and the anxiety of an Empire about to collapse pervade the novels set in the Orient. The other is often dehumanised, compared to animals and suspected of murder. In the end, however, when the detective discovers the truth, the 'otherness' and the 'strangeness' are found among the racist western characters. The murderer is 'one of us' and not 'one of them'. In the colonial novels Poirot, who embodies the 'other' among the European and American characters, functions as a mediator between the Englishness and the Otherness. His buffoonish appearance, his ridiculous accent and extravagant manners lighten the racist mood of the narration. His presence gives a comic thrill to the events and mocks the western preconceived ideas.

[181] Susan Rowland, *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction,* cit., p. 68.

[182] Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London, UK: Penguin Classics 2003, p. 1.

Of the four Christie's 'colonial' novels, the following chapter sheds a light on three of them: *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Death on the Nile*, *Appointment with Death*, while the last one – the famous *Murder on the Orient Express* – will be analysed in the next chapter. The only Christie's historical novel – *Death Comes as the End* – has been added to this chapter since it takes place in the Middle East within the Egyptian kingdom.

4.2 *Death Comes as the End* and the Impossibility of Home

𝒜 is a fact universally acknowledged that Agatha Christie was one of the world's most prolific writers. From the English country house to the exotic Middle East, her novels have made the readers travel the world while sitting comfortably on their armchairs. In these multitude of novels, *Death Comes as the End* differs from her other whodunits as the most unique and unusual work, a standalone story born of her passion for the Middle East. The novel was an experiment suggested by Professor Stephen Glanville, a friend of Max Mallowan, who provided her with books in order to get all the historical details of ancient Egyptian daily life correct. In her *Autobiography*, Christie expresses her gratitude towards Stephen "for all the trouble he had taken and the fact that it had been his idea in the first place" (AB, p. 498).

In the Author's Note preceding the incipit of the novel, Christie addresses the reader specifying that the story has nothing to do with her previous novels. Away from the civilized contemporary world, the narration takes place "on the West bank of the Nile at Thebes in Egypt about 2000 BC"[183], at the time of the early Middle Kingdom. It is a story dealing with the notion of home and with the notion of *nostos*. The protagonist – the widowed Renisenb – has returned to the house of her childhood after eight years of absence.

[183] Agatha Christie, *Death Comes as the End*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2017, p. 1. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

> Renisenb stood looking over the Nile. In the distance she could hear faintly the upraised voices of her brothers […] From her early childhood Renisenb could remember hearing these elders brothers of hers arguing in just those selfsame accents. It gave her suddenly a feeling of security … She was at home again. Yes, she had come home (DCAE, p. 5).

The recurring memory of her house as it was in her childhood is accompanied by the reassuring feeling that nothing has changed, including the quarrels between her elder brothers. Eight years have passed but Renisenb – now an adult – finds her rural home as frozen in time and space. The house is still structured in the same way, with the women's quarters in the back side. The familiar landscape surrounding the house is identical to the one vivid in her recollection, with the artificial lake, the flowering oleanders and jasmine and the sycamore fig trees. It is a journey back in the past that she also experiences with her sense of smell. The familiar scent of poppies and lotus invades the house and merges with the "smell of roasting ducks" and "of vegetables waiting to be prepared" (DCAE, p. 11), while in the background, the ear captures "the old familiar echoes" (DCAE, p. 7) and the reassuring sounds of a past still living in the present. Renisenb has "slipped back into the confines of her old life" (DCAE p. 30), enclosed by the unchanging protective home walls.

Renisenb's preoccupation of fitting in within her old rural home recurs obsessively throughout the narration. Although the home externally appears unchanged, she soon discovers it secretly hides "a rottenness that breeds from within and shows no outward sign" (DCAE, p. 17). The word 'home' is a human creation — it denotes not simply a physical living space, but also a culturally and socially defined dwelling place. Home is the place which, in Gaston Bachelard's words, "concentrates being within limits that protect".[184] Conventionally, the word 'home' connotes the patriarchal hierarchy, the place where men detain a dominant position and where women are relegated to a subordinate role. 'Home' also carries a very strong emotional and personal connotation. It suggests the private place of affection, warmth and protection. According to the

[184] Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, cit., p. xxvi.

German philosopher Otto F. Bollnow, home is the place where humans dwell – "to dwell means to be at home in a particular place, to be rooted in it and to belong to it"[185]. Home is the place where they can always return as it stands at the centre of their world.[186] For Douglas Porteous, the human geographer, home "is the space-group-time entity in which individuals spend the greater part of their lives. It is preferred space, and it provides a fixed point of reference around which the individual may personally structure his or her spatial reality."[187] Within the familiar boundaries of the home the individual feels safe and sheltered.

In Christie's fiction, however, home always uncovers an uncanny side. *Death Comes as the End* destabilizes the traditional notion of home as a protective place of absolute comfort and belonging, revealing its precarious essence. Renisenb has returned to the security of her father's house, the narrative voice informs the reader in the opening remarks. She feels that everything is the same as she has left it eight years before. However, her home undergoes a deep metamorphosis when, with the arrival of a menacing stranger – the patriarch's concubine – the repressed evil concealed within her old home inevitably comes to light following her assassination. The boundaries of protection collapse and the home, from a secure harbor, becomes a place of inhuman violence and a place of oppression to escape from: "the courtyard walls seemed to come nearer, the voices within the house and from the cornbins outside sounded louder and noisier" (DCAE, p. 230).

The murderer, driven by a destructive fury, violates the sanctity of the home and betrays his own family. Hence, the bounded domestic space transforms itself from comforting to threatening and Renisenb fails to recognize that place as her old home. In the endless longing to feel at home again, she discovers that the home of her memories is no longer there. It has been swallowed up by the unscrupulous plans of her elder brother – the murderer.

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[185] Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Human Space*, cit., p. 121.

[186] Ibidem, p. 119.

[187] Douglas J. Porteous, "Home: The Territorial Core," *Geographical Review* 66, no. 4 (October 1976): p. 390.

As the home loses its protective powers, the surrounding landscape undergoes the same uncanny metamorphosis.

> She looked around her […] at the smooth waters of the lake and the graceful little pleasure pavilion, the neat flower beds and the clumps of papyrus. All safe, nothing to fear, with around her the murmur of the familiar home sounds […]
>
> 'How peaceful it is here. One can't imagine anything horrible happening here.'
>
> But it was by the lake that they found Ipy the next morning. He was sprawled face downwards with his face in the water where a hand had held him while he drowned. (DCAE, pp. 196-197).

The familiar space near the lake where children play in the daylight, becomes at night the site for murder. Water, the universally known epitome for fertility and life, here becomes symbol of destruction. Moreover, the obscurity of the night facilitates the murderer, Yahmose, who can move unseen in the surrounding space and kill his younger brother Ipy. When the patriarch's concubine is killed on the footpath along the edge of a cliff leading to the house, the landscape reflects that sad event. There are deep black shadows covering the cliffs (DCAE, p. 93) that foretell the imminent tragedy. Those shadows become the emblem of the evil side of human nature, the visible representations of the lurking darkness that has affected Yahmose's soul and the domestic space of the household. The hope for Renisenb and her family lies in the possibility of overcoming the darkness and evil, by becoming aware of the real perpetrator.

Due to the fragile and precarious sense of protection her home provides, Renisenb finds solace and comfort away from its menacing walls.

> Renisenb had got into the habit of going up to the Tomb almost every day […] a feeling almost of escape […] She would sit in the shade of the rock chamber entrance with one knee raised and her hands clasped around it, and stare out over the green belt of cultivation to where the Nile showed a pale gleaming blue […] (DCAE, p. 59).

The Tomb "of the great Noble Meriptah" (DCAE, p. 12) – the patriarch of the family is the Ka Priest responsible for its upkeep – stands up on a hill overwhelming the house. The elevated position of the hill provides Renisenb with a bird's eye view – a view from a higher angle as if seen by a bird – which "makes possible a kind of mapping that can empower"[188] the character. In fact, it is up here that Renisenb understands the impossibility of a *nostos*, the impossibility of returning to her happy past and the unsettling truth that during the eight years of absence both herself and the home of her childhood memories have changed: "the old life here, the life I was so pleased to come back to, has passed away" (DCAE, p. 211). The *nostos* she has experienced with her arrival to the house is doomed to remain a mere illusion, for as Porteous confirms "home paradoxically involves journey, the result of which may be the loss of the original home image."[189] The traveler, Renisenb in this case, has left the boundaries of protection the home provides to discover the unknown external world. When she returns, however, she feels a stranger, she is an outsider within the place that once gave her nurturing and affection.

Renisenb feels protected, powerful and above everything up there on the Tomb hill, looking at the family house standing alone in the valley below. From that perspective, "the things down there […] do not seem to matter any longer" (DCAE, p. 132). The bird's eye view gives her an omniscient and superior point of view and emphasizes the limited perspective of human beings: from the heights, everything down in the valley seems insignificant, the estates, the cultivation, the farming lands. "From up here the house below and the busy hurrying figures had no more significance nor meaning than an ants' nest" (DCAE, p. 127). The chaos of human existence seems smaller and futile. Only the Nile, "the slim streak of pale silver" (DCAE, p. 127) and the majestic shining sun have meaning; they appear to her eyes as eternal and enduring. The Tomb becomes her personal place of escape where she can keep a visual control over

[188]Fabrizio di Pasquale, "Cartography and the Contemporary American Novel. Nic Pizzolato: An Example of Geocritical Analysis", in *Literature and Geography: The Writing of Space throughout History*, ed. Emmanuelle Peraldo. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing 2016, p. 32.

[189] Douglas Porteous, "Home: The Territorial Core," cit., p. 390.

the space surrounding the house: "I just sit there and it is peaceful […] I can be happy up there" (DCAE, p. 158).

In *Death Comes as the End* the natural environment plays a fundamental role. Both the life and the world are understood in relation to the river. The flowing Nile is a recurring image of the story to the extent of becoming a living character rather than a merely geographical location. The river, symbol of life, provides the Egyptians with fertile land. When Renisenb is about to marry one of her suitors, they sail together along the river Nile, to symbolise the renewing of life: "I look at the river", says one of the characters, "and I see the life blood of Egypt" (DCAE, p. 132). When her father returns from the North estates, everyone is waiting for him along the bank of the Nile. His arrival falls during the season of inundation, the time of the annual floods of the river, vital events for the Egyptians because its waters leave behind a deposit of rich, black silt. The floods mark the annual rebirth of the river valley, the new life given to the land "when the waters of the early inundation swept away the old and prepared the soil for the new crops" (CDAE, p. 213). The patriarch's arrival during such a fundamental period for the Egyptians, symbolises how vital his figure is for the wealth and growth of the family. The total dependency of every family member on his authority mirrors the absolute dependency the Egyptian farmers have on the Nile. Renisenb's father is the unquestionable owner of the estates and refuses to grant any measures of authority to any of his sons. He is the only one who feeds and clothes the household, even when the famine threatens the valley.

The flowing Nile accompanies Renisenb throughout the entire course of the events, giving circularity to the story. As a matter of fact, the narration is opened and closed by the image of the Nile. In the incipit Renisenb is standing over the river looking at her rural home (DCAE, p. 5) with the familiar echoes of her brothers' voices in the background. In the conclusion, the narrative returns to the place where the story has originated with Renisenb "looking over the valley below and to the silver streak of the Nile" (DCAE, p. 260). The inner and physical journey she has undertaken has helped her to understand that she has changed too, like her family and the house of her childhood: "Everyone being different from what I thought them. And what about myself?" (DCAE, p. 105).

The Nile thus becomes the metaphor of her personal journey of discovery along a treacherous route to reach a new point in life where all is calm and secure. The river that flows before her eyes symbolizes the inexorable running of time, the passage from past to present, from the old life to a new one. Renisenb's past is flowing away with the Nile and the future ahead of her shines like the sparkling waters of the river under the sun. She "looks over the river, seeing a world of changes, of new ideas – seeing a world where all things are possible to those with courage and vision" (DCAE, p. 261). When the murderer is unmasked and punished, the Nile becomes the emblem of purity. Its waters wash away the impurity of the human soul and leave behind a fertile ground for new crops to be planted. Renisenb' new life together with her lover Hori is emerging from "the pale silver blue of the Nile" (DCAE, p. 197). Her rebirth into her new self is achieved.

4.3 *Death on the Nile*: Egypt as Space of Otherness

The title of the Poirot novel *Death on the Nile* locates the story outside Great Britain's borders but within the margins of the immense English Empire, in a land that, at the time of the book publication in 1937, was still a British colony. For Edward Said, the Palestinian intellectual, Egypt "was not just another colony: it was the vindication of Western Imperialism; […] it was to become the triumph of English Knowledge and power."[190] Egypt gained total independence from the mother-country only at the beginning of the 1950s, when the Republic of Egypt was declared in 1953.[191] Poirot is not new to this exotic location. Several years before the publication of *Death on the Nile*, Egypt has served as the background for one of his short-stories – *The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb*. However, the representation of Egypt changes from the short-

[190] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, cit., 35.

[191] Cfr. Russel Roberts, *The Evolution of Government and Politics in Egypt*. Hockessin, DE: Mitchell Lane 2015, p. 42.

story to the novel. In *The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb* Egypt is portrayed as a site of excavation. The story takes place within the confines of an archaeological dig "into the heart of a vanished civilisation"[192] where an ancient Egyptian tomb has been discovered. Poirot and the faithful Hastings move around Egyptian antiquities walking in the golden sand to solve some mysterious deaths. In *Death on the Nile*, on the contrary, the oriental Egypt is depicted as a tourist place right from the beginning, a place that in the dominant Occidentalised imaginaries is seen as hot, sandy and full of timeless beauties. As it always happens with Christie's novels, both the ones set in England and the ones with a foreign setting, no description of Egypt occurs in neither of the two works – as rule number 16 of the Detection Club forbade its members: "a detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no 'atmospheric' preoccupations."[193]

A strong dynamism connotes *Death on the Nile* from the incipit. The characters that the reader will encounter aboard the Nile cruise are first presented in their private homes, scattered around England, The United States and Europe. These characters – from an American heiress to an hospital nurse – are very different from each other due to the fact that they range in class and wealth. What they have in common is the desire to visit Egypt, with its "real warmth, lazy golden sands, and the Nile."[194] Nonetheless, diversity characterises this peculiar group of tourists who will "have to be more or less all matey together" (DON p. 97) aboard the Nile cruise. The second part of the novel, entitled "Egypt", begins at the Cataract Hotel in Aswan and then the action shifts to the steamer, the SS Karnak, which starting from Shellal (DON, p. 87), carries the characters on a cruise between the first and second cataracts of the Nile, passing through Nubia. Hence, the story begins in the civilized western

[192] Agatha Christie, "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb" in *Hercule Poirot The Complete Short Stories*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2008, p. 162.

[193] S.S. Van Dine, "Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories", *The Thrilling Detective Web Site*. Web. 12 Sep. 2018.

[194] Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2014, p. 25.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

world of the mother-country but it develops within the oriental borders of Egypt, where the wilderness of the place will bring to light the inner barbarity of men. Due to this movement of the action and the opposition between civilized West and violent East, the novel recalls Shakespeare's *Othello*, where the story begins in Venice but it is the island of Cyprus that liberates the hidden violent passions of the characters.

The opening scene of the novel is set in a fictitious little village nearby the civilized and wealthy London, the capital of the Empire, where Linnet, an American heiress, has been refurbishing the old country house of Wode Hall. The scene crashes with the first image of Egypt given to the reader: "Aswan's a gloomy sort of place" (DON, p. 45), thus emphasising the geographical dichotomy between the civilized West – the familiar – and barbaric East – the strange – that will characterise the entire narration. Outside the Cataract Hotel in Aswan the opposition West-Otherness becomes more obvious when, in a dusty stretch of road by the river, Poirot runs into a local sandy market. Native sellers are trying to persuade him to buy the most extravagant things, from beads to real lapis. The scene is almost comical.

> 'You want beads, sir? Very good, sir. Very cheap…'
> 'Lady, you want scarab? Look – great queen – very lucky…'
> 'You look, sir – real lapis. Very good, very cheap…'
> 'You want ride donkey, sir? This very good donkey. This donkey Whisky and Soda, sir .... ' 'You want to go granite quarries, sir? This very good donkey. Other donkey very bad, sir, that donkey fall down...'
> 'You want postcard – very cheap – very nice...'
> 'Look, lady... Only ten piastres--very cheap – lapis – this ivory...'
> 'This very good fly whisk – this all amber...'
> 'You go out in boat, sir? I got very good boat, sir…' (DON, p. 46)

This chaotic market scene in the street of Aswan reinforces the stereotypical image that Occidentals have of Egypt – and of the Orient in general – as a barbaric and disorganised place and, at the same time, it connotes the

state of confusion and backwardness in which the peripheral places of the Empire were. The hot sandy market becomes the metaphor of an irrational other devoted to chaos. Egypt is portrayed again as a chaotic place when the daily train from Cairo to Shellal is late. "It arrived at last, and the usual scenes of wild activity occurred. Native porters taking suitcases out of the train collided with other porters putting them in" (DON, p. 102). The porters' disunity intensifies the image of Egypt as a space/place of disorder. As the characters leave the Cataract Hotel in Aswan and start on their journey sailing down the Nile, the uncanny landscape surrounding the river strengthens the image of Egypt as a space of wild otherness.

> They looked down to the shining black rocks in the Nile. There was something fantastic about them in the moonlight. They were like vast prehistoric monsters lying half out of the water (DON, p. 59).

This is the very first description the reader gets about the Nile. The black rocks are a recurring image within the novel. Emerging from the deep waters, they are compared to the monstrosity of fantastic creatures, or, perhaps, these 'monsters' coming from the darkness of the Nile are nothing but the symbol of those hidden passions that the characters of the novel have concealed in the back of their soul. The adjective "prehistoric" underlines the state of underdevelopment in which Egypt was back in the 1930s, as it was still living in a primitive era, away from the civilisation of the mother-country. Hence, nature with its savageness becomes the symbol of the Oriental culture itself. As the cruise ship gets into the wild heart of Egypt, the primitive and uncanny aspect of the rocks increases, symbolising the complete absence of civilisation and the foremost retreat from the civilized world. The water assumes a "savage aspect" (DON, p. 104) and the landscape around the Nile shows no traces of development. The few houses that once were there, have now been "abandoned and ruined as a result of the damming up of the waters" (DON, p. 104). Humans have not managed to enter and dominate this region, where the wild rocks come down "with a kind of sheer ferocity" (DON, p. 106). These

portrayals of the river alternatively describe the Nile and Egypt as a hostile place, adverse to man and as a place where repressed feelings come to light.

> There is something about this country that makes me feel – wicked. It brings to the surface all the things that are boiling inside one (DON, p. 104)

Rosalie Otterbourne, one of the tourists of the cruise, comments together with Poirot the effects the foreign landscape has on the passengers. According to Edward Said, in the European imagination the Orient – Egypt in this case – has been "since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscape."[195] In *Death on the Nile* the alien landscape disturbs the Occidentalised passengers of the cruise because it encourages their hidden vices. In such a space of wilderness the human being escapes from the strict moral values of the Occident and surrenders to primordial passions. As the party embarks down the Nile, the premonition of danger associated with the Oriental landscape deepens and the gloomy landscape seems to mirror the atmosphere on board the cruise: the wild black rocks and the absence of civilisation have increased the uncanny feeling that something tremendous is about to happen. Likewise, the danger power of the setting is mirrored in the tragic events that unfold within the bounded space of the cruise ship. Away from the 'civilisation' of London, Simon's and Jaqueline's evil schemes prosper. The two lovers manage to murder the third member of a love triangle, the wealthy Linnet, and driven by the need to keep it secret, they end up murdering two innocent witnesses. Once they have escaped from the decorous behaviour the Occidentalised spaces requires, their repressed ego comes to light. As the steamer sails down the Nile, they too have embarked on a private journey "on a swift-moving river, between dangerous rocks, and heading for who knows what currents of disaster…" (DON, p. 115). The Nile thus becomes the symbolic passageway into the primitive nature of humanity. Once the 'safe' borders of civilisation have faded away and the space of otherness has wrapped the human soul, there is no point of return. As Hercule Poirot warns the young Josephine:

[195] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 1

"You have cut the bonds that moored you to safety, I doubt now that you could turn back if you would" (DON, p. 115), recalling in some respects the adventure of Kurtz in wild Congo in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. The passengers of the steamer simultaneously feel attraction and repulsion for the Nile. The uncontaminated exotic landscape around its banks provides a sense of peacefulness (DON, p. 94) but it also evokes a feeling of uncanny inscrutability. In fact, the dark rocks shining in the waters become the physical representation of the passengers' secret feelings.

The image of Egypt as a space of wild otherness is also conveyed trough the characterisation of the natives who are invariably shaped through the touristic gaze. While the Occidentalised passengers play a central role, the native Arabs are segregated to the periphery of the narration. In fact, they are background characters who play very marginal roles. They are servants, waiters, dragomen, beggars, donkey boys, street sellers and stewards. They are "always pestering you for money, or offering you donkeys, or beads, or expeditions to native villages, or duck shooting" (DON, p. 95). They are not given any particular psychological depth and often they do not have a name, the first sign of personal identity. This anonymous nameless mass of people becomes an extension of the place they represent. As a matter of fact, the indigenous are described with negative adjectives usually associated to the wildness of Egypt. They are primitive, lazy, disorganized and intrusive. When Colonel Race is first introduced within the novel, the narrative voice declares that he is "usually to be found in one of the outposts of Empire where trouble was brewing" (DON, p. 145), thus emphasising the many problems the uncivilised and barbaric natives create for the mother-country, here embodied by Colonel Race. The indigenous population is also depicted as linguistically inferior compared to the passengers aboard the steamer. In fact, their broken English makes them ridiculous and, consequently, they are often misunderstood. The lack of the English language defines the other as uneducated and as the inferior opposite to the West. Furthermore, in the description of the oriental people the Occidentalised narrative voice employs animal imagery. When Poirot is harassed by local vendors outside the hotel in Aswan, he compares them to "human clusters of flies" (DON, p. 46). Flies are usually persistent and annoying

insects, like the market vendors Poirot bumps into. Additionally, in the common imagination flies are seen as dirty insects that proliferate in unclean environments. The animal similitude dehumanises the foreign other and it gives a negative connotation to both the Egyptians and to city of Aswan. The residents are portrayed as irritating people, always bothering the western tourists for money, while Aswan is implicitly displayed as a dirty place, a nest of filthy flies. Likewise, dirtiness is associated to the local children.

> 'I suppose it would be quite impossible to get rid of these awful children […] their eyes are simply disgusting, and so are their noses, and I don't believe I really like children – not unless they're more or less washed and have the rudiments of manners' (DON, p. 95).

In this process of 'othering' the East, native children are not spared. They are reflected as beggars and their manners are as wild as the landscape surrounding the Nile. They become the physical representation of the wild place they inhabit. Furthermore, western tourists regard indigenous children as exhibits. During an excursion to Abu Simbel to visit a great temple carved out of the rock, Linnet and Simon bump into a dozen Nubian boys. They have invented a game and a song to please the wealthy Occidentals (DON, p. 135). The two lovers laugh at the improvised performance and produce some small change for them.

The fact that the Occidentalised passengers of the cruise misjudge the native population epitomises the repressed colonial fear of the other. In *Death on the Nile*, Fleetwood – an English man who has spent most of his life working in Egypt – is suspected to be Linnet's murderer. According to the passengers' opinion conveyed by the narrative voice, he is the personification of how the Oriental space can manipulate the Occidentalised man. Fleetwood is believed to be dishonest and immoral because, having spent too much time in contact with the wildness of the East, has lost the qualities and values usually associated to the West. According to Edward Said, "the Oriental is irrational, depraved (fallen), childlike, 'different'; thus, the European is rational, virtuous, mature,

'normal'".[196] As a matter of fact, Fleetwood is accused of being a depraved bigamist – to use Said's adjective – because although he has married a local woman and has three children, he has tried to marry – and failed – one of Linnet's maids. Colonel Race, the embodiment of the English Imperialism, believes that Fleetwood killed Linnet in the grip of revenge – the American heiress had found out about his previous marriage. The betrayer of the mother-country needs to be punished for having abandoned the 'civilised' world.

Agatha Christie's fascination for enclosed settings finds one of its best representations in *Death on the Nile*. The steamer SS Karnak sailing down the Egyptian river is completely out-of-the-way. The idea of this inaccessible bounded place increases the suspense and the uncanny feeling that someone among the 'civilised' passengers is a murderer. Although some scenes take place beyond the physical borders of the cruise, the Karnak delimits the major events within its confines. The anonymous narrator places the reader inside the enclosed space of the story by presenting a meticulous plan of the steamer (figure 8).

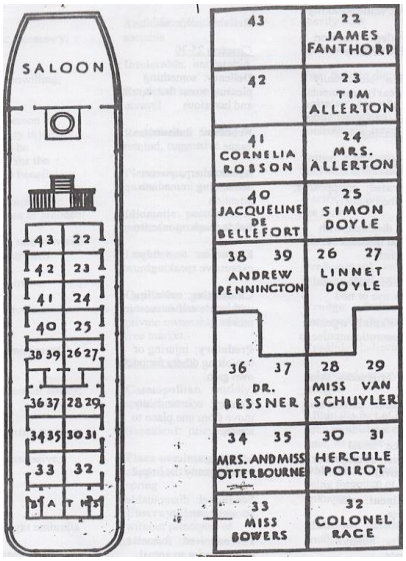

Figure 8 Plan of the SS Karnak – Promenade Deck

[196] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 40

The reader joins Poirot on his investigation moving through the pages and always looking back at the plan of the SS Karnak, trying to localise the passengers on the map during the night of the assassination. This constant movement across the pages establishes the spatiality of reading. The act of reading is no longer a static contract between reader and text and between reader and author, but it becomes a deeply spatial event. The plan shown in Figure 8 illustrates the positioning of the cabins along the promenade deck. The steamer becomes the representation of the binary opposition between West and East. As a matter of fact, it is constructed as an Occidentalised microcosm that encourages colonial practices of exclusions. For instance, the western tourists occupy all the cabins while the indigenous people are completely excluded from the deck. They are the invisible workforce of the steamer and of the story. The reader, however, is not excluded from the SS Karnak. He dwells the narrative space and moves within its borders looking for clues.

At the end of the story, the journey across the Nile becomes the metaphor of a psychological journey the characters have taken within their inner self. The native people are freed by every type of suspicion and the real murderers – Simon and Jaqueline – are brought on shore. They are 'rational' and 'civilised' Europeans. With this conclusion, the author shows that backwardness and irrationality are mistakably recognized as Oriental features. The real darkness is concealed within the rational Occident. Hence, the 'Otherness' has nothing to do with the physical space, but, as Merja Makinen has pointed out, it is an 'otherness' that lies within the Anglo-American psyche.[197] The uncanny and gloomy Egyptian landscape encountered during the sail eventually appears for what it really is: just an imagination built on western prejudices. The widespread preconceived ideas about the Orient – ideas that erroneously denote the Occident power over the East – have allowed the characters to misjudge Egypt "as a phenomenon possessing regular characteristics"[198] such as disturbing exotic landscapes and ridiculous people. All the passengers aboard the Nile

[197] Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie Investigating Femininity*. Basingstoke, UK & New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan 2006, p. 168

[198] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 42.

cruise have experienced Egypt through corrupted western lenses that, since antiquity, have denoted the Orient as a place of passive otherness located outside the safe boundaries of the European civilisation.

Death on the Nile ends with the expulsion of the two assassins from the ship. The journey ends where it has originated. The steamer SS Karnak returns to Shellal but the passengers are not the same people they were at the beginning of the journey. All of them – except for the two murderers – have faced their fears and found a new equilibrium.

4.4 *Murder in Mesopotamia* and the Western Construction of the Oriental Space

Murder in Mesopotamia is the first among Christie's novels set in the Middle East. The title is deeply spatial, in fact it locates the story within the confines of Mesopotamia, modern-day Iraq, that at the time of the book publication, in the year 1936, was under the British control.[199] Historically, the region of Mesopotamia has given life to many rich cultures which prospered in ancient Iraq, the land between the two rivers. The contribution of the Assyrians, the Sumerians and the Babylonians to the flourishing of the European culture have been incommensurable. As a matter of fact, Mesopotamia has become one of the most significant archaeological sites, where the rediscovery of ancient cities has given again its past magnificence to the region. *Murder in Mesopotamia* takes place around an archaeological expedition site at Tell Yarimjah, near the town of Hassanieh. However, the major events unfold within the enclosed space of the expedition house, whose plan is provided to the reader by the first-person narrator (figure 9), the nurse Amy Leatheran, who tells the story in retrospect.

[199] Cfr. Peter Gran, *Beyond Eurocentrism: A New View of Modern World History*. New York, NY: Syracuse University Press 1996, p. 55.

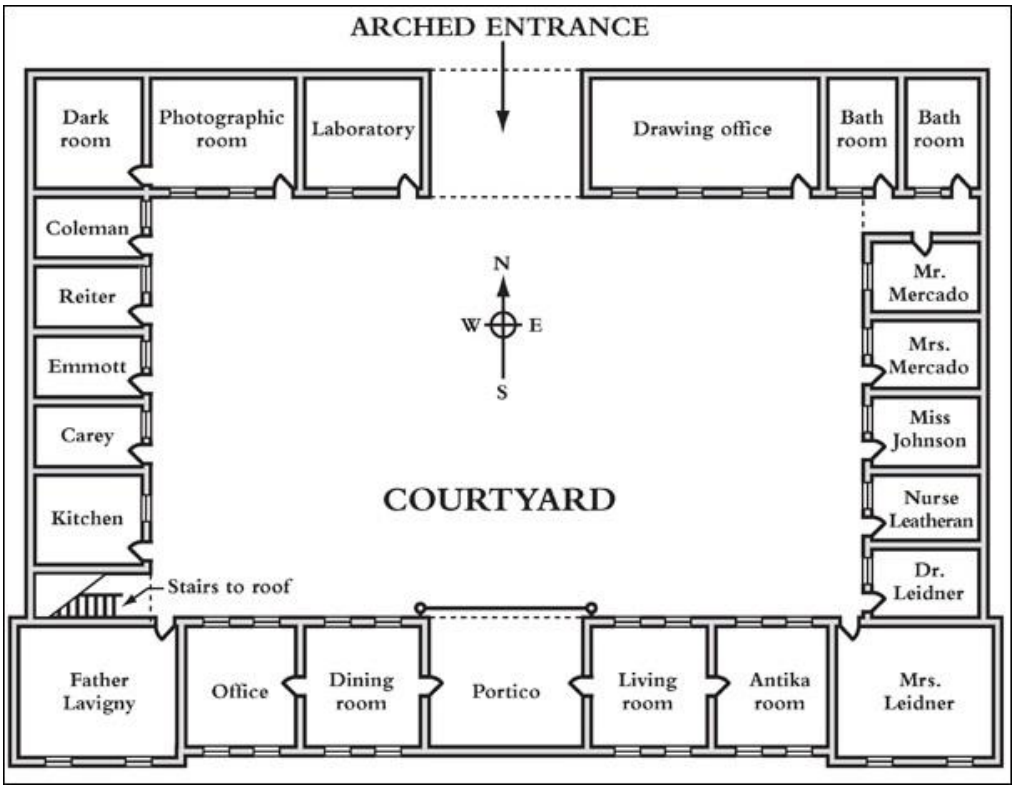

Figure 9 The Expedition House

The house recalls the Expedition House in Ur where Agatha Christie spent several days while her husband was engaged in the archaeological dig of that area.[200] Figure 9 shows how an original Arab building was arranged and adapted to create the setting Agatha Christie loved the most. In fact, the expedition house is U-shaped as most of Agatha Christie's fictitious country houses – it presents the same structure of the first country house depicted by Dame Christie in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles Court*. Henceforth, in *Murder in Mesopotamia* the expedition house is portrayed as a classical British manor house, a patriarchal institution which ruled over a region, the tangible symbol of the power of the wealthy landed gentry. The expedition house epitomises the British authority over Iraq and at the same time it denotes the consolidate power of the immense English colonial Empire. In fact, during the expansion of the imperial domains, the prosperity of the country house was often connected

[200] Cfr. Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*, cit., p. 441

to the slave trade and to the colonial plantations, as Edward Said has demonstrated in his analysis of *Mansfield Park* in the essay "Jane Austen and the Empire". Behind the wealth of the estate of Mansfield Park there is the colonial Antigua. Sir Thomas, the owner of the estate, is the archetypical master who exploits the West Indies colonies to earn money for his English countryside mansion.[201] Thus, the country house was used to maintain control over the colonial space. Similarly, in *Murder in Mesopotamia* the expedition house functions as a British country house. It is constructed as a Western microcosm that contrasts with the backwardness of Iraq. No indigenous people live within its premises. They are relegated to the outer space of the archaeological dig where they occupy very marginal roles, juxtaposed with animals: "Outside were sleeping quarters for the native servants, the guard-house for the soldiers, and stables, etc., for the water horses" (MIM, p. 28). In fact, the expedition house is deeply Occidentalised. It lodges the wealthy characters of the novel coming from the United States, from Great Britain and from Europe. Although coming from different nationalities, these western individuals share the same social class and the same Occidentalised views. The opposition between bounded space of the house – the Occident – and the outside space of the region – the Orient – characterises the entire narration and contributes to the process of 'othering' the oriental space. In the common imagination, the Orient stands for both the exotic Other and danger. The Occident, on the contrary, represents the familiar space and the tranquillity. The nurse Amy Leatheran, the first-person narrator of the events in *Murder in Mesopotamia*, contributes to the intensification of the discrepancy between familiar space and menacing space. She describes Iraq using adjectives with negative connotations, a behaviour typical of a British citizen living in the periphery of the Empire.

> The dirt and the mess in Baghdad you wouldn't believe – and not romantic at all like you'd think from the *Arabian Nights*! Of

[201] Cfr. Edward Said, "Jane Austen and the Empire", in *Culture and Imperialism*. New York, NY: Alfred A. Knopf Inc. 1993, p. 95.

> course, it's pretty just on the river, but the town itself is just awful – and no proper shops at all […] just a lot of rubbish.[202]

The narrator is disgusted by everything that is not English. She describes Baghdad as a dirty city, with nothing resembling the exotically romantic stories she has read in the *Arabian Nights*. Being the personification of the narrow colonialist mind, the nurse Amy Leatheran criticises what she finds different from her mother-country and different from her expectations. She is negatively struck by the 'mess' and the 'dirt' of a country still struggling to find its independence. Hence, Amy's deep biases are exposed right at the incipit of the narration. Like most English people of those years, she has "received ideas about the Orient"[203] and judges the East according to preconceived western standards. The East is different, inferior, it is dirty, uncivilised and immoral, on the other hand it is also exotic and romantic.

Human experience in the world has always been characterised by spatial signals such as here and there, near and far, domestic and foreigner, familiarity and strangeness, and shelter and menace. Thus, if Europe represents the 'here', the domestic and the protection, the Orient, on the other side, embodies the 'there, the foreigner and the menace. Therefore, the Orient has been constructed as Europe's Other and located outside the familiar borders of the western space. The Orient epitomises everything that is not European, it is the unknown 'out there' beyond the confines of civilisation. This process of remapping the Orient has contributed to the rise of the myth that sees the East as an exotic other. Europe has always been fascinated by the myth of the Orient as a site of exoticism where repressed passions resurface. The fact that the oriental space was not ordered by the strict western rules of rationality contributed to the creation of the myth of the Orient as an escape-space from the rigidity of the bourgeois moral values. Hence, if the rational man best epitomises Europe, the Orient is an irrational sensual woman. In *Murder in Mesopotamia* Amy Leatheran is evidently affected by European stereotypical

[202] Agatha Christie, *Murder in Mesopotamia*. London, UK: HarperCollins 2016, p. 3. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.
[203] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 65

ideas about the East. She arrives in Baghdad full of positive expectations, believing to find an Orient filled with the romanticism of the stories of Scheherazade. However, the reality she meets is totally different. Throughout the entire narration she often condemns the Arabic world for its reprehensible dirt. She does not even understand the human value of the archaeological site.

> The whole excavation looked like mud to me – no marble or gold or anything handsome – my aunt's house in Cricklewood would have made a much more imposing ruin! And those old Assyrians, or whatever they were, called themselves *kings* (MIM p. 49).

When at the dinner table the members of the archaeological expedition discuss about a three thousand years old palace they are bringing back to life, Amy again expects it to be a royal palace like the ones read in the *Arabian Nights*, with expensive marble and shining gold. Her western expectations fail her again when, during a visit to the excavation dig, she sees "nothing but *mud*! Dirty mud walls about two feet high" (MIM p. 48). Amy does not see beyond her western preconceived beliefs. Her nationalistic and Anglo-centric views transform Mesopotamia from the cradle of the human civilisation into a mass of mud and ruins. Amy embodies the typical colonialist mind: what is located outside the European frontiers is perceived as otherness. Moreover, as a real colonialist, she is suspicious of foreigners and her prejudices do not spare the non-British Poirot. "I don't think I shall ever forget my first sight of Hercule Poirot […] I knew he was a foreigner, but I hadn't expected him to be *quite* as foreign as he was […] He looked like a hairdresser in a comic play!" (MIM, p. 97). Poirot's extravagant appearance and his peculiar accent do not fall into Amy's biased ideas about foreignness. Although being a European, Poirot is a citizen of the world, he crosses different spaces but inhabits no one. Being a member of the upper middle class, he is accustomed to going abroad. The reader meets him in Iraq, in Egypt, in France, in London, in the English countryside. He crosses and re-crosses borders. He is placed outside the western construction of space. He is neither the 'Self' – the West – nor the 'Other' – the East. He represents all that is left outside the spatial categories. He is Europe's repressed comic alter ego, he personifies what for the occidentals is ridiculous and hence must be concealed. In fact, he does not exemplify the 'other' geographically speaking,

but he embodies the repressed 'other' hidden within the western self. His comic accent and appearance mitigate the serious tone the narrator gives to the narration of the events. As Alison Light has asserted, Poirot's comic personality mocks "English prejudices about foreigners."[204]

The dichotomy bounded space and unbounded space is also conveyed through the opposition between the English language and the native language. The bounded space of the expedition house is linguistically ruled by the English language, which best designates the hegemonic power of the Occident. The outer space is described, on the contrary, as linguistically confused. The native workers inhabit the Oriental space and express themselves both in Arabic – the language of the colonised – and in an imperfect English. The linguistic difference between the two groups locates the occupants of the house in a position of superiority compared to the indigenous population – the western residents use the language of power. In ancient Greece, the house constituted the reign of the *civitas*. What was beyond its walls and outside the confines of the *polis* was defined as barbarous and uncivilized. In *Murder in Mesopotamia*, the house delimits the supposed civilised world from the dangerous outside space. However, when Poirot proves that the murderer is a member of the archaeological team living within the western microcosm of the expedition house, the house walls reveal the fragile protection they offer. The danger does not come from a tangible geographical place – in this case the 'strange' East – but it generates within the Western world.

The spatiality of the story is conveyed trough the graphic illustration of the enclosed space where the events take place. The map (figure 9) covers an essential role throughout the narration. The narrative voice provides the map at her arrival at the house, before the outburst of the tragic events. However, it contains no important information for the discovery of the murderer's identity. In fact, it is up to the reader to fill in the details and to meticulously locate the various characters on the map during the afternoon of the assassination. Henceforth, the map tests the spatial ability of the reader, who must penetrate and see beyond the bounded space of the household to uncover the truth. The shared spatiality of the story between Hercule Poirot and the reader transforms

[204] Alison Light, *Forever England*, cit., p. 84

the act of reading into a form of dialogic communication. Simultaneously, the reader becomes the narrator and the detective, going through the space of the narration.

The geographical region of Mesopotamia encourages the creation of a parallelism between the digging works of the archaeologists and Poirot's investigative methods. As the archaeologists return to the past to discover lost civilisations and antiquities, similarly Poirot investigates into the past to unfold secret mysteries. The assumption that past and present are deeply intertwined is proved to be true for both archaeologists and detectives. In *Murder in Mesopotamia* Louise Leidner's death will be understood only in relation to her shadowy past. Dr Leidner, the leader of the archaeological team and the murderer, acknowledges to Poirot his archaeological skills: "You would have made a good archaeologist, M. Poirot. You have the gift of recreating the past" (MIM, p. 277). Poirot's final victory proves the importance of understanding the past for the comprehension of the present.

4.5 *Appointment with Death* and the Desert as Terra Nullius

Exotic atmosphere and foreign landscape are also the major ingredients of *Appointment with Death*, a Poirot novel set within the confines of the British Mandate of Palestine and Transjordan. A strong dynamism connotes the story right from the incipit. The reader meets Poirot vacationing at the Solomon Hotel in Jerusalem but the main events unfold among the ancient ruins of Petra, in the middle of the Arabian desert of southern Jordan, where the main characters have planned an excursion. The city of Jerusalem functions as the starting point of the narration. The first impression the reader gets about the city is highly filtered.

> 'You like Jerusalem, yes?' asked Dr Gerard, after they had exchanged greetings.

> 'It's rather terrible in some ways,' said Sarah, and added: 'Religion is very odd!' […] 'And the awful things they've built, too!' Said Sarah (AWD, p. 4).

The heroine of the story, Miss Sarah King, is evidently disappointed by the city of Jerusalem, which she describes as terrible. However, no real descriptions of the city are given to the reader, considering that the opening scenes are set only within the bounded space of the Solomon Hotel, with the only exception of a visit Sarah King pays to the Mosque. The Solomon Hotel lodges western travellers sharing the same social class. Then the narration moves from the enclosed space of the hotel to the boundless space of the desert, where the wealthy residents of the hotel go to visit Petra.

The rocky desert of Petra functions as a backdrop to the action of the novel. As a matter of fact, the shifting of the setting from the Occidentalised hotel in Jerusalem to the wild desert in Petra foretells the upcoming tragic events. Away from the 'civilised' microcosm of the hotel, the unscrupulous murderous plans prosper. As it happens in *Murder on the Nile*, the wildness of a borderless space far away from civilisation encourages criminal actions. The "rose-red city of Petra"[205] is always described in relation to the red rocks that characterise the entire surroundings.

> The ride was like a dream. It seemed to her afterwards that it was like the pit of Hell opening at one's feet. The way wound down-down into the ground. The shapes of rock rose up around them, down, down into the bowels of the earth, through a labyrinth of red cliffs (AWD, p. 37).

The first glimpse Sarah King gets of Petra in the distance is a labyrinth of red rocks. Due to the hot climate, the sand and the difficulty of the journey, the rocky desert is compared to Hell. The metaphorical association to Hell underlines the emptiness of the desert and the total absence of civilisation. In

[205] Agatha Christie, *Appointment with Death*. Retrieved August 2018 from http://detective.gumer.info/anto/christie_22_2.pdf, p. 12.
All the subsequent references to the novel will be to this e-book and only page numbers will be given in parentheses following the quotations in the main text.

the collective imagination, the desert is viewed as a wide-open space where there are no spatial signposts such as "here" and "there" and "home" and "away". The absence of tangible topographical markers and the sameness of the surroundings increase the unpleasant sense of disorientation the humans experience when in the desert. As Robert Tally has argued, "disorientation appears to be part of our fundamental being-in-the-world".[206] However, while in the civilisation the human construction of the space provides the reassuring illusion that this geographical bewilderment can be controlled – for example with maps – in the desert, on the contrary, this feeling of displacement intensifies. The human being fears such an enormous space, where the comforting delimitation between domestic space within the borders and threatening space outside the borders reveals its fragility. Christie has experienced this same sense of displacement when travelling for the first time around the Arab desert: "it was impossible to tell whether you were going north, south, east or west" (AB, p. 372). Thus, the overwhelming power of the desert locates the desert itself outside the human construction of spatial categories. Its uncontrollability and uninhabitableness reinforce the image of the desert as a 'no man's place' that escapes men's control and dominion. When the European colonisers occupied and 'Occidentalised' those places outside the Pillars of Hercules – the gateway to the unknown world – only the desert landscapes remained untouched by the European fury. The aridity of the land and the hostile climate made those places inhospitable and unwelcoming. Thus, the empty desert has become the opposite of the civilised and often overcrowded places of Europe. The desert of Petra conveys the idea of the Oriental space as a *terra nullius*, a nobody's land that validates the Western civilizing mission. It is the association of the Oriental space with savageness and particularly with emptiness which mostly dominates the Western popularised depiction of the 'wild Orient'.

The arid desert landscape becomes a vivid presence in *Appointment with Death*, rather than being a plain setting. It is within the desolate rocky desert away from civilisation that the murder takes place. In a campsite "pitched in the

[206] Robert Tally, *Spatiality*, cit., p. 1

middle of a wilderness of rose-red rocks" (AWD p. 63) consisting of tents and caves, the tyrannical Mrs Boynton is killed while vacationing with her stepchildren. No one of them mourns her sudden death. The incarnation of a real matriarchal despot, she exploits her financial power over her children, forcing them to live in a constant state of tyranny. Mrs Boynton acts against the patterns of behaviour and expected norms of the Victorian 'Angel in the House' figure. She is selfish, cruel and oppressive. Christie is violating once more the Victorian idea of maternal love and of domestic serenity. Mrs Boynton offers no protection and affection to her children, as it happens similarly in *Crooked House* and in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. The failure of the maternal figure is epitomised in the consequent failure of the home as a secure harbour.

The natural colour of the ancient city of Petra becomes the physical manifestation of the hidden emotions of the troubled Boynton family. The different shades of red vary depending on the characters' mood and foreshadows the imminent terrible events. For instance, during the day of the murder the rocks seem to darken. They are compared to the colour of blood (AWD, p. 40), a premonition of death. Similarly, the colour red – symbol of overwhelming passions – matches with the turbulent soul of the murderer and, at the same time, the surrounding rocky caves become the physical representation of the sinister personality of the matriarchal despot. When Sarah King arrives at the campsite, she notices this Buddha-figure sitting in the shade of one of the caves.

> She had ridden down into this dark winding valley and here, like an arch priestess of some forgotten cult, like a monstrous swollen female Buddha, sat Mrs. Boynton (AWD, p. 37).

The caves of Petra are dark, shadowy and impenetrable, like Mrs Boynton's soul. The campsite is delimited by numerous uncanny caves, symbol of the tyrannical presence of Mrs Boynton watching over the other members of the expedition. She spends all day long sitting in her cave showing no interest in the ancient history of Petra. She exemplifies the typical western attitude towards things decidedly not European. After the assassination of the

matriarchal despot, the ancient city of Petra shifts from being touristy and romantic to very unsettling. The rose-red rocks increase the disturbing sense of emptiness and displacement at the base of the narration. Thus, the desert becomes the allegory of death. To deprive the Earth of rain and growth is to turn it into a deadly place. The desert's major characteristic is the lack of vegetation and the absence of any form of life. The human beings cross the desert, but no one inhabits it. It is a space located outside the idea of *civitas* and outside the rational construction of space. In *Appointment with Death* the allegorical connection between desert and death constitutes the heart of the narration. Away from the bourgeois rules of the western society, the desert frees the inner savagery of men. Likewise, the desert becomes the allegory of the constant feeling of alienation the western man experiences. Symbol of silence and of solitude, the desert is also a place of survival. The inadequate human response to its openness and the impossibility to dominate it through spatial categories increase its inhuman side.

As it has been the case with the other Christie's novels with an Orient background, the Middle East is always presented through the eyes and the expectations of the western characters. As a matter of fact, the description of the eastern region provided by Christie is always affected by colonialist and Orientalist ideas.

> "I think it's rather wonderful and just a little horrible," said Sarah. "I always thought of it as romantic and dreamlike-the 'rose red city'. But it's much more real than that-it's as real as-as raw beef" (AWD, p. 39).

Sarah's western expectations are disappointed by the reality of the place. She has a received idea about the Orient, which she has always believed to be a romantic dream place. In the widespread idea, the red rose reigns as the ultimate symbol of romantic love. According to Sarah's opinion, the red of the rocks in Petra, however, has nothing to do with the colour of the flowers. It recalls the colour of the fresh meat of a beef. Similarly, the natives are presented through the western gaze. They are often misjudged and relegated to minor roles. They are described as "strange wild-faced men" (AWD, p. 36)

and as "very stupid" people (AWD, p. 77) without discipline. When Mrs Boynton is poisoned while sitting at the mouth of her cave, Lady Westholme – a British politician – declares she has seen the victim argue with "one of the Bedouin servants attached to the camp" (AWD, p. 61). Poirot, in charge of the case, knows that the physical description of the anonymous native servant is of considerable importance for the success of the investigation. However, Lady Westholme declares she has not seen him distinctly, because "these Arabs all look alike" (AWD, p. 62). She is placing all the blame on the innocent natives; hence when the indigenous dragoman is questioned during an interrogation, he desperately replies: "Always, always I am blamed! When anything happens, say always my fault. Always my fault" (AWD, p. 77). Lady Westholme is dehumanising the others, depriving them of names and of physical features. Arabs are perceived as an anonymous mass without face and without individual identities. What Christie's characters fail to realise is that they are the only real foreigners/intruders when they cross the confines of the space they call home. As Edward Said has affirmed, "in general it was the West that moved upon the East, not vice versa."[207] Christie's characters move towards the East and occupy places that belong to the local people. Lady Westholme, moreover, incarnates the typical Western citizen who treats with suspicion what is not identified as European. For instance, during the tour of the attractions of Petra, she constantly ignores the local guide. She relies on a Western published tourist guidebook instead of experiencing the actual Orient through the explanations of the locals. She believes she knows more about Oriental history than the 'unreliable' tour guide. She personifies the Western supposed superiority over the Orient and the typical arrogance of the West that believes to know everything about Oriental history. This is also illustrated in one scene of *Murder on the Nile* when, during an excursion to the temple of Abu Simbel, the tourists of the cruise show disinterestedness towards the guide. They prefer the refined comments of Dr Bessner instead of relying on the information provided by the native dragoman. Eventually, Poirot discovers that lady Westholme has used the image of the anonymous Bedouin servant as a mask. In fact, he proves that she

[207] Edward Said, *Orientalism*, cit., p. 73

has killed the tyrannical Mrs Boynton disguised as a native Arab to protect her reputation. She has exploited the place and the local people for the success of her murderous plan. Henceforth, the borderless space of the desert becomes the allegory of the aridity and sterility concealed within the human soul. The conclusion sees the characters in a theatre in London, few months after their excursion to Petra. The final happy ending is marked by their return to the civilisation of the mother-country and by the acquired freedom from the maternal tyranny.

Chapter 5

“Trains Have Always Been One of My Favourite Things”: Murders on the Rails

Chapter 5
Debora Sarnelli

Introduction

The purpose of the following chapter is to investigate Agatha Christie's narratives set on trains. It considers two of her train mysteries: *Murder on the Orient Express* and *4.50 from Paddington*. The author employs the train as a narrative device to create a small, isolated community and to recall the spatial structure of the bounded space of a drawing-room.

5.1 Trains and Detective Fiction: A Narrative Device for Closed Settings

When readers glance at Agatha Christie's oeuvre they definitely perceive the closeness and intimacy which characterise all her major settings. Whether in London, in the English countryside or abroad, the pattern she follows is always the same. Her detective stories revolve around the separation between the public outside world and the domestic interior in which a murder is committed. In fact, her crimes are never a public affair, and they are consumed within a private space where the homely unexpectedly becomes unhomely. Drawing inspiration from the country house and the pastoral English village, Christie transfers the same domestic atmosphere to those places where a sudden incident increases the seclusion of her characters. The means of transportation provide the author with a peculiar mode of isolating the suspects within a temporary community in motion. The trains in particular offer a distinctive diversity within Christie's backgrounds and, at the same time, they become a sort of country house on wheels. The enclosed train compartments recall the same spatial structure of a living room, with the only difference that the berths are constantly accompanied by the onward movement of the train. The stillness of the space within the family house or within the London suites completely vanishes in the constant journey of the train, which crosses ad re-crosses geographical borders.

Agatha Christie had a real-life passion for railways: "trains have always been one of my favourite things" (AB, p. 363), she declares in her *Autobiography*, demonstrating once more that her novels integrate milieus she was acquainted with. From her penchant for the English commuter trains to her luxurious journeys by the Orient Express, her *Autobiography* reveals the author's fascination for the railways. In those days, especially during the years between the two world wars, the train constituted the most common form of long-distance travel. Cars were very rare, hence the pleasure of moving from one place to another was made possible through a convenient train service

which connected the English towns from south to north. With the increasing number of commuters travelling from the rural country side to the city, trains made travel a much likelier event. They were the emblem of a new epoch and the tangible sign of the progress of modernity. As the symbol of the wave of change encouraged by the rapid modernization of the means of transportation, the railway played a significant role in the industrialization of the British nation and in shaping a modern urban life.

According to Laura Marcus, the railways' rushing modernity had a connotation of mystery. It erased the distance but at the same time it increased the anxieties of the passengers. In fact, the public space of a train was often connected to crimes due to the fact that railways multiplied the possibilities of encounters with foreigners, which is a distinctive feature of modern life. The strangers travelling in your same compartment could be thieves or assassins. In particular, the dark space of the tunnel was commonly feared since the absence of light encouraged criminal deeds. Detective fiction has recurred to the moving train motif to play with the reader's fears. Sherlock Holmes is often engaged in train journeys, although Conan Doyle rarely transmutes the space of the railway into the site of crime. Laura Marcus has noted that as a genre, detective fiction is "near-contemporaneous with the expansion of the railways and railway travel."[208] As a matter of fact, railway stations have contributed to the spread of detective fiction. The railway was one of the primary spaces of reading. The commuters could purchase cheap books – usually popular fiction – in the train stations to entertain themselves during the wait or during the journey.

Walter Benjamin in the essay "Detective Novels, on Journeys" has highlighted the similarity between detective stories and the railway journey.[209] He declares that the detective novel is an essential reading during train journeys because it alleviates the passenger's anxieties with its suspense and shocking revelations. The travellers, he observes, prefer to purchase a detective novel at the station, rather than take it from the shelves at home, trusting the options

[208] Laura Marcus, "Oedipus Express: Trains, Trauma and Detective Fiction", in *The Art of Detective Fiction*, eds. Warren Chernaik, Martin Swales & Robert Vilain. Basingstoke, UK & New York, NY: Palgrave MacMillan 2000, p. 219.

[209] Walter Benjamin, "Detective Novels, on Journeys", *Verso Books.* Web. 18 Nov. 2018

the railway bookstalls offer. Moreover, Benjamin compares the movements of the train with the movements of the narration. The rhythm of the narrative follows the rhythm of the wheels and the train stopping in each station marks the path of the detective hero throughout the narration.

Fictional trains are usually dangerous locales but they assure the readers, to quote Ian Carter, that "unreason – robbery, fraud, murder – will not disrupt the modern world's smooth progress […] social life returns to its usual, boring round. Normal service is resumed, strictly to timetable."[210] The rhythm of the narration follows the rhythm of the train: it marks the detective's journey towards the final truth. The train settings are convenient in crime fiction because they offer "intriguing variations on that classic device, the sealed room."[211] For Christie, the train is a narrative stratagem she employs to reproduce the same closeness of the setting she loved the most: the bounded space of a country house. Moreover, she is able to accentuate the isolation of her characters within these novels set in motion.

Agatha Christie wrote her first train detective novel in 1928, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, adapted from the 1923 Poirot short-story *The Plymouth Express*. The year of the publication – the year "I hate recalling" (AB, p. 346) – marks a difficult period in the author's life. The failure of her first marriage and her clamorous disappearance influence the success of the novel. Robert Barnard has defined the novel as "Christie's least favourite story, which she struggled with just before and after the disappearance"[212]. The writing of *The Mystery of the Blue Train* was a torment for Christie. Her mother's death and her husband's infidelity had left a deep scar on the author. The necessity to make money had forced her to write the novel without any personal pleasure. In her *Autobiography* she reveals "I have always hated *The Mystery of the Blue Train* […] I cannot say I have ever been proud of it" (AB, p. 358). The story revolves around the assassination of a young American heiress, murdered while travelling by the luxurious Blue Train to reach the French Riviera. However, the

[210] Ian Carter, *Railways and Culture in Britain: The Epitome of Modernity*. Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press 2001, p. 225.
[211] Ibidem, p. 219.
[212] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 200.

motif of the train detains a very marginal role in the novel, considering that most of the events take place between London and the Mediterranean coastline in the south of France. Something similar happens in *The A.B.C. Murders*. The novel was published in 1935, during a very prolific decade for the author, when several of her masterpieces were published. The events of the novel do not unfold within the bounded space of a train. As a matter of fact, no trains appear during the narration, but the story is constructed following the strict train timetables. In fact, the title refers to a name of a railway guide. The homicides are committed according to a strict alphabetical order referring to the sequence of the ABC railway guides which the murderer drops near each corpse. The sense of linearity introduced by the train exemplifies the detective's investigative methods.

The railway motif finds its best expression in *Murder on the Orient Express* and in *4.50 from Paddington*. While the first novel is set on the luxurious Orient Express train, the latter reproduces the experience of travelling by a commuter train departing from Paddington station in London. *Murder on the Orient Express* is one of the most famous murder cases solved by the cosmopolitan Hercule Poirot. *4.50 from Paddington*, on the contrary, sees an elderly Miss Marple struggling with her decaying health and the lost identity of a mysterious corpse. Both novels deal with the train as a space characterised by anonymity and mobility. Whether the first is completely set on the train – with the only exception of the incipit scene – the latter shifts from the non-place of the train to the domestic space of a country house. Both crimes apparently seem to be public affairs, but eventually the detectives disclose their domestic nature. The two trains circumscribe the action to a small area as it always happens in Christie's family dramas.

5.2 *Murder on the Orient Express*: From Non-Place to Place

Personal experiences have always been Christie's major source of inspiration. From her passion of country houses to her exotic adventures in

archaeological digs, her oeuvre reveals the strong connection between the author and her life experiences. As a matter of fact, Christie writes about locations she has at least visited once. Whether in London or in the Middle East, every locale is shaped out of her real-life experience of that particular place. The same applies to the well-known train *de luxe* Simplon Orient Express, "a train that began service in 1883 to provide convenience to travellers between Western Europe and the Middle East."[213] The Orient Express detains a very special place in Christie's life. She travels for the first time on the Orient Express after the divorce to her first husband, the colonel Archie Christie, when the author decides to visit the near East aboard the famous train.

> All my life I had wanted to go on the Orient Express. When I had travelled to France or Spain or Italy, the Orient Express had often been standing at Calais, and I longed to climb up into it. *Simplon-Orient Express – Milan, Belgrade, Stamboul*… (AB, p. 361).

On board the Orient Express – the train of her dreams – Christie bids farewell to her previous life, the one with Archie, and begins her journey towards what she has called her "second spring" (AB, p. 363) leading to the marriage with Max Mallowan. The couple spends the honeymoon on the train *de luxe*, stopping along the route to visit cities and to be acquainted with the local cultures. The fascination for the train continues in later years when Christie and her husband travel again on the Orient Express on their archaeological expeditions. Her passion for the Simplon-Orient Express, to quote Charlotte Trumpler, "shows that Agatha Christie found […] the Orient Express itself a particular good way of moving between two such different worlds as Europe and the Orient."[214] The beautiful experiences Christie has aboard the train *de luxe* lead the author to employ it as the locale for one of her detective novels. *Murder on the Orient Express* probably is her most famous detective story, due to its ingeniously constructed plot and the shocking final solution. Robert

[213] James Zemboy, *The Detective Novels of Agatha Christie: A Reader's Guide*, cit., p. 87

[214] Charlotte Trumpler, *Agatha Christie and Archaeology*. London, UK: British Museum Press 2001, p. 261.

Barnard defines it as "the best of the railway stories"[215], while Mary Wagoner labels it as "one of Agatha Christie's most popular works."[216] The novel futures her Belgian detective Hercule Poirot on his way back to London from Syria. He is travelling on the luxury train known as the Simplon-Orient Express together with other thirteen passengers when one of them is mysteriously murdered in the middle of a snowy night. Two notable events inspired her novel: the kidnapping and murder of the aviator Charles Lindbergh's son in 1932 and an accident happened in 1929 to the Orient Express, when it was trapped by a snowdrift for several days in the Turkish highlands.[217]

The title of the novel circumscribes the events to the bounded space of the train *de luxe*. In fact, the actions unfold within the restricted compartment space and the entire narration is marked by the movements of the train on the rails. The incipit sees Poirot departing from Aleppo in Syria by the Taurus Express train line. Once in Istanbul, he books a compartment on the Orient Express, a sort of luxury hotel on wheels. The Calais Coach – where Poirot happens to travel – is a first-class compartment which soon appears as a multicultural microcosm, as Mr Bouc, the director of the train line and Poirot's old friend, observes.

> All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never perhaps to see each other again.[218]

The multiculturalism of the coach strikes Poirot together with the strange fact that the Orient Express is completely booked both in first and second class during the snow season. The train is taking the return route. In fact, all the

[215] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 199.

[216] Mary S. Wagoner, *Agatha Christie*. Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers 1986, p. 51.

[217] Cfr. Charlotte Trumpler, *Agatha Christie and Archaeology*, cit., p. 273.

[218] Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*. New York, NY: Harper Paperbacks 1961, p. 17. Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.

passengers are travelling back home, leaving the Middle East behind. The space they share is presented to the reader through a map the anonymous narrator provides after the assassination of Samuel Ratchett (figure 10).

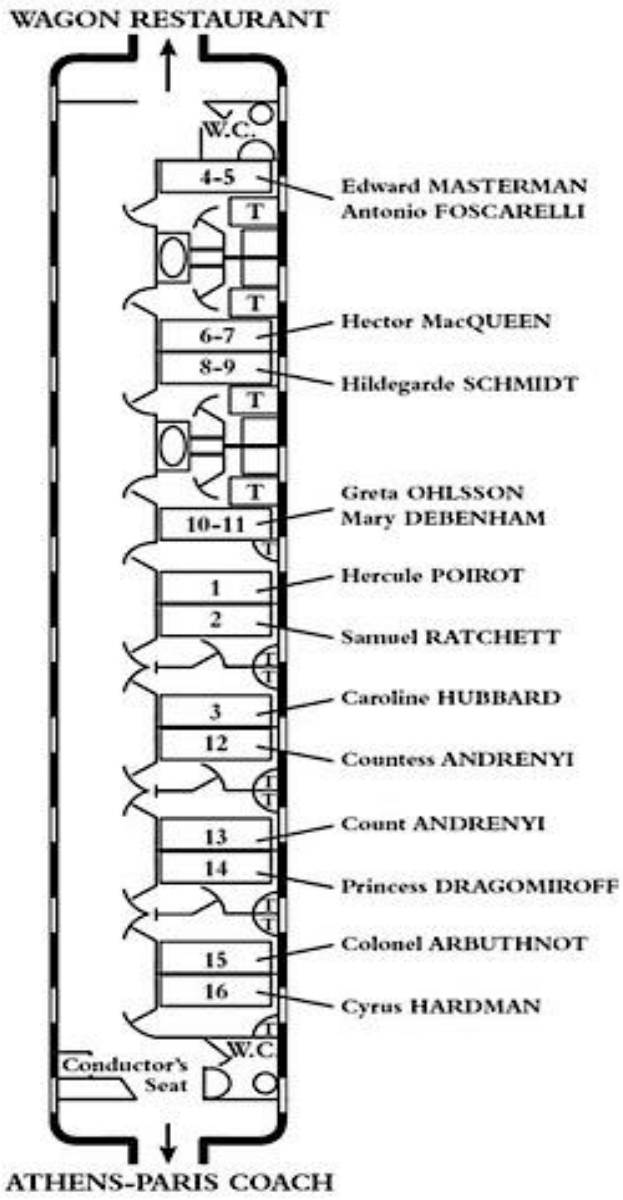

Figure 10 Plan of the Calais Coach

The map is the classic device Christie employs to invite the reader to enter the investigations on the detective's side. It delimits the space of the narration and indicates the position of the berths and their occupants. The topography of

the Calais coach becomes fundamental for the discovery of the murderer. The alibis of each passenger depend on their position within the bounded space of the berths and their movements around the enclosed space of the train. The motif of the bounded space with no contact with the outside world is intensified by the heavy snowstorm which hits the train "between Vinconvci and Brod" (MOE, p. 24), in Northern Yugoslavia. "The train has stopped. We have run into a snowdrift. Heaven knows how long we shall be here" (MOE, p. 23). Hence, geography becomes crucial for the development of the narration. Ratchett is killed when the train is snowbound, thus causing the failure of the murderers' ingenious plan. The absence of foot marks in the fresh snow outside Ratchett's windowpane demonstrates that no one has entered and left the train, as Mr Bouc emphasises: "the murderer is with us – on the train now" (MOE, p. 28).

The heavy blizzard and the consequent seclusion of the train occupy most the narration. The impossibility to communicate with the outside world deepens the claustrophobic atmosphere within the Calais coach and its spatial isolation. Hence the strong dynamism which has characterised the narration in the first section of the novel, contrasts with the immobility that envelops the train when the furious power of the snowdrift stops its journey. Ratchett is stabbed when the train is crossing "the line dividing Eastern and Central European time zones"[219], the line which separates the Orient from the Occident. The train is thus suspended between borders, in an unknown area among unsettling mountains. The climax of the novel – Ratchett's assassination – occurs when the train is lost in this limbo zone where the sudden snowstorm has ruined the murderer's intentions. Poirot's investigations are influenced by the outside landscape. When Ratchett dies, the train stops its journey. The snowdrift causes the impossibility for the train to move onwards and, at the same time, it hides the truth from Poirot. Metaphorically speaking, the snow is completely blocking his view. The blizzard continues during the passengers' interrogations and it will eventually soften when the Belgian detective discovers the secret relations between all the characters and the murdered victim. In fact,

[219] Chris Ewers, "Genre in Transit: Agatha Christie, Trains and the Whodunit," *Journal of Narrative Theory* Volume 46, no. 1, Winter 2016, p. 110.

only when the passengers of the Calais coach are unmasked as culprits and their connection to the Armstrong family is revealed, the Orient Express can resume its journey. Thus, the train becomes the metaphor of life. Death has stopped its journey, but once the order has been restored by the detective, life must recommence its linear journey, like the one of the train.

The snow symbolically conceals the real identities of the victim and of the other twelve passengers. They are all travelling under false names and playing a part in a big performance where Poirot is the only spectator. The mystery deepens when the detective finds a burnt piece of paper in Ratchett's berth, the evidence of the victim's real identity. His real name is Cassetti, the kidnapper. He is a ferocious assassin. Three years before in America, he kidnapped and killed Daisy Armstrong the only daughter of the Armstrong family, destroying the life of other twelve people, the ones travelling aboard the Orient Express together with Poirot. Hence, the detective understands that the community of strangers sharing the Calais coach is essentially the replica of the Armstrong household. There is the nurse, the chauffer, the governess, Daisy's aunt and grandmother. Therefore, the train from a non-place – according to Marc Augé's definition – becomes a living place delimited by borders recalling the bounded space of a house, especially the space of a drawing-room. The relationships between the passengers create the intimacy of a household to a point that the impersonal and anonymous space of the train becomes personal and domestic. The varied company assembled in the train noticed by Mr Bouc on the day of the departure is the symbol of multicultural America. Only in America, says Poirot, "there might be a household composed of just such varied nationalities—an Italian chauffeur, an English governess, a Swedish nurse, a German lady's-maid, and so on" (MOE, p. 132). The motif of the family home – Agatha Christie's obsession – is once again embedded in a novel that is set outside the household domain. The train, however, serves as a narrative device to provide a bounded setting like the one circumscribed in the walls of a house. Somehow, *Murder on the Orient Express* recalls Edgar Allan Poe's locked-room mysteries. The "heavy banks of snow surrounding the train" (MOE, p. 24) delimit the space of the action and the locked doors communicating with the other compartments restrict the focus on every passenger. The immobility of the

snowy landscape reflects the static space of the compartment. Within such a space, Poirot must solve the case as a real armchair detective. "We are cut from all the normal routes of procedure" (MOE, p 102), he says. He must sit back and think out the truth, without the assistance of the police.

For Marc Augé – the French anthropologist – every place concerned with transport and transit is a non-place. He depicts the non-place as a space that "cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity"[220], one where the human beings do not experience social interaction but only solitude. The train itself and the railway stations are a good example of Augé's idea of the non-place. They are places of transience that do not relate to the commuters where the anonymous solitude deprives people of their identity. "The space of non-place creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude"[221], the French anthropologist writes, considering how non-places are temporarily dwelled by passengers who pass and re-pass through them but no one inhabits them. Another one of Augé's assumption is that non-places do not integrate past spaces, as "they are lived through the present."[222] However, in *Murder on the Orient Express* the action taking place within the bounded space of the train recalls traces of the past. The assassination of Ratchett-Cassetti can be understood only in retrospect. In the final scene of the novel Poirot solves the mystery by connecting his murder to the Armstrong drama and by discovering the real identity of each passenger. Hence, Christie's Orient Express deviates from Augé's definition of the non-place. In fact, what at first sight appeared as an anonymous train eventually turns out to be a domestic community of people sharing the same history and the same need for vengeance.

The Orient Express crosses and re-crosses national borders, moving from the Middle East to the heart of Europe and vice versa. In this endless motion between regions and cultures, geographical borders seem to fade away. In fact, the experience of speed blurs the outside space rushed in front of the

[220] Marc Augé, *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London, UK: Verso 2008, pp. 77-78.
[221] Ibidem, p. 103.
[222] Ibidem, p. 104.

passenger's eyes. Trees become green stains, the nature loses its contours. Thus, the railway creates a new landscape characterised by the incontrollable succession of objects that capture the passenger's eye for barely a second. The rapid motion of the train penetrates the space producing a temporary landscape without details. The traveller loses the spatial points of reference when on a train. In *Murder on the Orient Express*, the movement of the train suggests linearity, sequence and order. Just as the train moves in lineal fashion, Poirot's investigative approaches are based on order and method. The forward motion of the train becomes the metaphor to understand the detective's – and the reader's – journey towards the truth. Poirot must be "neat and orderly" (MOE, p. 59) to solve the puzzle. As Dennis Porter argues: "the detective novel promotes the myth of the necessary chain. It implies that the only path to the […] solution of a mystery is the step-by-step path of logico-temporal reconstruction."[223] Poirot moves with linearity and method: the examination of the clues, the passengers' interviews and, in the end, the revelation. He does not provide the solution before the last chapter and, metaphorically speaking, before the train reaches the terminus station.

The symbol of the white snow – a constant presence within the narration – dominates the novel, conveying different and opposing meanings. The night when Ratchett-Cassetti is killed, a blizzard hits the train. The deep and falling snow, in this case, represents death. When Poirot starts his investigation, the snow is used as a metaphor for the pure truth he seeks. He must erase the superfluous white blanket of snow to let the truth shine. In the common imagination, the white colour of the snow is often associated with purity, light and innocence. When Poirot discovers the connection between Ratchett-Cassetti and the murder of young Daisy Armstrong, the outside snow denotes the purity and the innocence of the baby girl, who was too quickly taken from life. Likewise, the infinite expanse of white snow can be perceived as the physical representation of the solitude which unites the passengers aboard the Orient Express. Just as the snowstorm has frozen the train in time, Cassetti's

[223] Dennis Porter, "Backward Construction and the Art of Suspense", in *The Poetics of Murder*, eds. Glenn W. Most & William W. Stowe. San Diego, CA: Harcourt Brace 1983, p. 334.

fury has interrupted their personal journeys. It was as if they suddenly stopped living three years before. Now that justice has been served, the train – and their life – can go on. Hence, the snow from a symbol of death becomes the emblem of renewal, of rebirth and hope. In the end, Poirot comprehends the act of justice done by the passengers who conspired to kill Cassetti – who had escaped conventional justice – and together avenged Daisy's murder. They all confess their guilt but Poirot decides to protect the family and lets them go unpunished. He has no sympathy for Ratchett-Cassetti. "The demand for justice supersede the demands of ineffective law."[224] He will eventually present a different solution to the police: a stranger entered the train at Vincovci and killed Ratchett. In these concluding remarks, the snow falling gently and silently becomes the symbol of oblivion. The truth behind Cassetti's assassination will never be discovered. It rests concealed under the soft white snow.

5.3 *4.50 from Paddington*: From the Train to the Country House

The trains of *Murder on the Orient Express* and of *4.50 from Paddington* offer divergent types of train journeys. Whether the first deals with a luxury travel experience and international journeys connecting the great cities of Europe with the neighbouring East, the latter is a modest regional train departing from Paddington station in London and touching the towns of the south-west of England. While the Orient Express offered luxurious and exclusive travel for the elite of the high society, the commuter train was closer to the experience of the average reader of detective fiction. Christie experienced and enjoyed both train journeys. Whereas the Orient Express has accompanied the author in her trips around Europe and around the Middle East, the commuter train was her favourite means of transportation, when travelling around England. In her *Autobiography*, she recalls with affection her trips to the North to visit Abney Hall – her sister Madge's residence – and to Ealing, where she

[224] Mary S. Wagoner, *Agatha Christie*, cit., p. 52.

used to go every summer to stay with her grandmother. Her trips to Ealing were marked by shopping expeditions to the Army & Navy Store and by the warm afternoons spent in the garden.

The title of the novel refers to a train departing from Paddington station in London which is scheduled to leave at ten minutes before five o' clock in the afternoon. The events follow the trajectory of the train. From the incipit in London, they move towards the south-west of England to reach St Mary Mead – Miss Marple's home village – where Mrs Elspeth McGillicuddy is travelling to visit her friend. However, the village occupies a very marginal place in the novel. The major events unfold outside Miss Marple's territory, between the space of the commuter train from Paddington and the grounds of Rutherford Hall, a country house located along the train route in the outskirts of Brackhampton. After an intense day of shopping in the capital, Elspeth McGillicuddy is travelling in an empty compartment of the train few days before the Christmas holidays. As another train pulls up alongside hers, she gazes idly out of the windowpane into the first-class carriage now opposite. The scene she witnesses is shocking: a man is strangling a blond woman. She immediately reports what she has witnessed to the appropriate authorities but no one seems to believe her, with the exception of her old friend Miss Marple, who sets out to discover where the assassin has concealed the dead body. The two ladies repeat together the train journey from London by the 4.50 Paddington train and notice that a sharp curve causes the train to slow down somewhere on the edge of a vast estate, known as Rutherford Hall. The murdered woman's body must be concealed within its premises. Thus, the events move from the bounded space of the train to the bounded space of the country house of Rutherford Hall and the story develops, to quote Robert Barnard, "into a good old family murder."[225] The rhythm of the onward train journey marks the movement of the narrative towards the truth.

The space of the train is represented as a gendered, masculine space where women are relegated to marginal roles and are completely invisible in the anonymous mass of men strolling around the station and in the train compartments. Within this highly-gendered space Mrs McGillicuddy struggles

[225] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive*, cit., p. 194.

to make her voice heard. The male railway workers treat her with disregard. She is travelling first class but the porter takes her to the third class. "I'm travelling first-class," said Mrs McGillicuddy. "You didn't say so," grumbled the porter […] Mrs McGillicuddy who *had* said so, did not argue the point."[226] Once she has witnessed the brutal murder through the windowpane, she asks for help to the ticket collector but he does not believe her. His eyes drop to the open magazine lying on the seat, with the image of a man strangling a woman on the front cover. He evidently believes that the detective story she is reading has affected her imagination.

> He said persuasively: "Now you don't think, madam, that you'd been reading an exciting story, and that you just dropped off, and awaking a little confused---" Mrs McGillicuddy interrupted him. "I saw it" she said. "I was wide awake as you are" (4.50 FP, p. 8).

With the increase of the literacy rate, reading detective fiction during train journeys became a very common practice. As Laura Marcus has argued, cheap books, like detective novels, were usually purchased at the railways bookstalls to entertain the travellers during the monotony of the journey, thus contributing to the production of the "railway fiction."[227] Mrs McGillicuddy is among those travellers who find temporary delight in a detective story. However, her status as a woman discriminates her. She is believed to be susceptible, irrational and more deceptive. She cannot control her emotions to a point that she imagines things. On the contrary, the male ticket collector embodies efficiency, rationality and the train itself, which cannot stop its route. It must speed to reach the terminus without looking back. A sudden and brutal death cannot stop the rational journey of the train. As Michel de Certeau has argued, the train "inscribes, indefinitely, the injunction to pass on; it is its order written in a single but endless line: go, leave, this is not your country, and

[226] Agatha Christie, *4.50 from Paddington*. London, UK: Fontana 1983, pp. 5-6.
Further references to this edition will be cited parenthetically within the text.
[227] Laura Marcus, "Oedipus Express: Trains, Trauma and Detective Fiction", in *The Art of Detective Fiction*, cit., p. 209.

neither is that."[228] The railway produces a rationalisation of space which merely comprehends the onward motion and inevitably excludes women.

Once in St Mary Mead, Mrs McGillicuddy reveals what she has seen to her friend Jane Marple. The two elderly ladies walk down to the little police station of the village and present the matter to Sergeant Cornish. However, after inquiries and explorations, no woman's body is found, neither on the Brackhampton train nor along the train line. As the mystery deepens, Miss Marple refuses to leave the murderer unpunished. It is not easy "to make a body vanish into thin air. That body must be *somewhere*" (4.50 FP, p. 19). Driven by the need to give justice to both her friend and the dead woman, she decides to investigate the matter and to discover what the police have not found out yet. Supported by Elspeth's recollections and descriptions, she repeats the journey from Paddington and, just when she is about to drop the idea to seek out a solution, she notices something along the train route that provides her with a completely different possibility.

> "I'm too old for anymore adventures", said Miss Marple to herself, watching absently out of the window the curving line of an embankment … A curve … Very faintly something stirred in her mind […] It suggested an idea. Only an idea. An entirely different idea (4.50 FP, p. 21).

The sharp curve on a high embankment enforces the commuter train to slow down providing a way to dispose of the body. With this new idea in her head, Miss Marple goes back to St Mary Mead where, with the help of Leonard, the vicar's son, she gets hold of a map representing the geographical area in the periphery of Brackhampton where the train follows that deep curve. She must make a daylight journey for a better observation.

> Miss Marple got out the map with which Leonard had supplied her and began to observe the countryside. She had studied the map very carefully beforehand and […] she was soon able to

[228] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press 1988 p. 112

> identify where she was just as the train began to slacken for a curve (4.50 FP, p. 24).

When Miss Marple decides to investigate the crime, she knows that she firstly needs to find the exact place where the body was concealed, since that place might lead to the assassin. As Geoffrey Hartman has argued, "to solve a crime in detective stories means to give it an exact location: to pinpoint not merely the murderer and his motives, but also the very place, the room, the ingenious or brutal circumstance."[229] Nonetheless, the woman's body she is looking for must be somewhere. It must have been pushed or thrown out of the train in the exact geographical area where the railway line makes a big curve before getting into the town of Brackhampton. It is below this high embankment that the railway encircles the property of Rutherford Hall, a country house belonging to the Crackenthorpe family. This must be the place Miss Marple is looking for. However, when Miss Marple realises that her fragile health will not allow her to continue the investigation, she engages the redoubtable Lucy Eyelesbarrow – an Oxford genius – to gain employment at Rutherford Hall as a housekeeper in order to locate the body. Hence, when the focus moves from the train to the country side, the action shifts from the anonymous space of the train to the personal and intimate space of the family house.

The entire narration is constructed on the binary opposition between the train perceived as a masculine space and the house constructed as a female domain. When Mrs McGillicuddy moves within the space of the station, she observes how the platforms are patronised by a refined male clientele, while she hardly notices any women. Paddington station in London is dwelled by business men who travel to the capital city by train and return to their homes at the end of the working day. The urban environment in which buildings and streets are traditionally male-made, is a space where men go to work, while women are relegated to the space of the home to look after the children and the house. Hence, if urban life and men are commonly perceived as aggressive and powerful, the countryside and women share the same perceptions of

[229] Geoffrey Hartman, "Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Story", cit., p. 165.

domesticity and security. In a society where gender hierarchies are continuously encouraged, such a bounded space as the train carries and produces gender biases. The railway aims at consolidating the women's association with the home. In *4.50 From Paddington* only the male characters use the train – with the exception of Mrs McGillicuddy. Mr Crackenthorpe – Rutherford Hall's owner – lives at home with his only unmarried daughter, Emma. His three sons – Harold the city financier, Cedric the artist and Alfred the black sheep of the family – have left the house and work in the city away from the countryside. They catch the train when they visit the family house every Christmas, while Emma is the only one forced to live within the domestic walls to look after their elderly father. She has no hope for the future. Women, who are usually described as domestic, are excluded from the public working world. Men, on the contrary, inhabit the urban space and take part in important public events. The identification of women with the home becomes a symbol of a patriarchal society which relegates women to the domestic sphere and to the countryside. In fact, if the urban space is male-dominated, the countryside represents femininity: domestic, passive, irrational, submissive. The opposition masculine feminine is combined to the opposition between public and private. Whereas the man works in the public space, the woman must manage her domestic and nurturing tasks, respecting and worshipping the rational husband who economically supports the family.

The commuter train speeding from London and invading the green expanses becomes the symbol of how urbanisation and industrialization are depriving the land of its original beauty. Rutherford Hall is located in an in-between space, stuck between the past and the future. Erected on the outskirts of Brackhampton, it is encircled by the railway line and, in the distance, "ringed round now with building estates and small suburban houses" (4.50 FP, p. 28). When Lucy gets the first glimpse of the house, she is shocked to find it in such a state of neglect.

> Lucy Eyelesbarrow drove through an imposing pair of vast iron gates. Just inside them was […] a small lodge which now seemed completely derelict[...] A long winding drive led through

> large gloomy clumps of rhododendrons up to the house. Lucy caught her breath […] she saw the house which was a kind of miniature Windsor Castle (4.50 FP, p. 30).

The house has lost its past magnificence whether through war damage or through neglect. The gloomy façade reflects the interior bounded space. The rooms are desperately cold and uncomfortable full of heavy mahogany Victorian furniture. All around its premises there is nothing more than an abandoned park, unused buildings in ruins and fields overgrown with weeds. On the other side of the railway – which encircles the entire mansion – the town of Brackhampton stands in the distance. "You hear the traffic a bit when the wind's that way – but otherwise it's still country" (4.50 FP, p. 33), Mr Crackenthorpe tells Lucy after her arrival at the Hall. The train running along the borders of his property epitomises the wave of modernity which passes without affecting the grounds. "Bustling urban life", says Lucy, "goes on all around it, but doesn't touch it" (p. 39). Its uncanny isolation makes it the perfect place where to dispose of a dead body. The train – symbol of mobility and linearity – represents the motion towards the future and the progress. The country house of Rutherford Hall struggles to find its place within this new modern era. It is still anchored to its past glory. Located on the margins of the town, it has lost the powerful role it once detained within the surrounding area. Now, neglected weeds conceal the disappearing splendour of a house which is waiting to be swallowed up by the impending supermodernity and transformed into "a nursing home or a school" (4.50 FP, p. 159). Hence, if the train denotes the inevitable movement towards the future, Rutherford Hall designates the nostalgic emblem of a vanishing era: the epoch of the great country houses. Moreover, the antagonism between the commuter train and the Hall is exemplified in the opposition between mobility and stillness. The dynamism of the train contrasts with the static space of the house.

It is the windowpane through which Mrs McGillicuddy witnesses the murder of the young blond woman that inevitably bonds the two spaces. In fact, the windowpane operates to connect the anonymous space of the train to the private and domestic space of the house. The windowpane strengthens the

sensation of being spatially separated from what it is outside since it is, to quote De Carteau, "what allow us to see […] it creates the spectator's distance: You shall not touch; the more you see, the less you hold."[230] The windowpane produces a panoramic view of what is beyond its borders, but it is a mere act of observation. It is a boundary which separates the viewer from the outside world. Images fly past the carriage window but soon fade away into the distance. Mrs McGillicuddy sees the murderer but she is not able to stop him. Her glimpse into the other train compartment marks the shift from the impersonal non-place of the train – where people lose their identity – to the domestic space of Rutherford Hall. The dead woman's body is found by Lucy in a sarcophagus kept in one of those dilapidated buildings belonging to the property. It is not a mere coincidence. The murderer, says Miss Marple, "must have known all about Rutherford Hall – its geographical position, its queer isolation – an island bounded by railway lines" (4.50 FP, p. 39). The state of abandonment in which the Hall is found and its marginal position encourage the assassin's plans. He conceals the dead body in a place which has long been forgotten by the world, thus showing the connection he has with the house.

The in-between space of the railway crosses and re-crosses other liminal spaces, often invading the intimacy of those places dwelled by human beings. The train, as Marc Augé discusses, "often passes behind the houses making up the towns, catches provincials off guard in the privacy of their daily lives."[231] However, as a site characterised by transience, openness and mobility, the non-place of the railway is denied any sense of identity. As it happens in *4.50 From Paddington*, the anonymity of the train space facilitates the blurring of the identities of both the victim and the murderer. The onward movements through the outside space accentuate the sense of displacement and the impossibility to distance oneself from the anonymous mass of other travellers.

> There is something so anonymous about a train. If he'd killed her in the place where she lived … somebody might have noticed him come or go. Or if he'd driven her out in the country somewhere,

[230] Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, cit., p. 112.

[231] Marc Augé, *Non-Places*, cit., p. 99.

> someone might have noticed the car […] But a train is full of strangers coming and going (4.50 FP, p. 38-39).

As the railway dissolves distance bringing together people and places, it also dissolves identities. The train increases the anxiety of the experience of the non-place: the feeling of non-belonging to neither this place nor that place, reduces the travellers into an unhumanised mass of anonymous others. The riddle at the heart of the narration is the search for the exact geographical place the train was crossing when the woman was strangled and successively thrown out of the train. Hence, in the concluding remarks, the location of Rutherford Hall is revealed to be more important that the house itself. Only when the astute Miss Marple is able to localise the body and place the murder, the real identities of both the victim and the murderer can be uncovered. The two strangers observed by Mrs McGillicuddy eventually acquire a name. Dr Quimper – old Mr Crackenthorpe's personal doctor – killed his French wife because he saw a chance of marrying a rich woman, Emma Crackenthorpe, to inherit the entire property of Rutherford Hall and the family fortune. The murderer is the only one among the male characters of the novel who declares he does not use the Paddington line, he possesses a car, thus encouraging the readers to suspect the Crackenthorpe brothers, who are common habitués of the 4.50 commuter train. In the final chapter, Miss Marple forces the assassin to repeat his murderous act in the intimacy of the living room of Rutherford Hall. The bounded space of the living room recalls the spatial structure of the enclosed train compartment but this time the absence of the windowpane enables Mrs McGillicuddy and the police to lay hands on the assassin. Before reaching the terminus station, the train – metaphor for the narration – needs to travel back in time to uncover past secrets and then it moves onwards to reach the final destination.

Conclusions

The research was aimed at investigating Agatha Christie's most recurrent milieus, focusing on the country house, the countryside village, the city of London, the Middle East and the train compartments. The country house is the first locale constructed by the author in the debut novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles,* which marks the author's engagement with bounded places where there is no influence from the outside world. Agatha Christie writes about the country house during a period when this very English institution is undergoing irremediable changes. Numerous country houses lost their historical role and were either demolished or transformed in schools, hotels and public houses. In literature, the country house finds its last expression in Christie's narrative. Her fictional country houses are richly furnished and here family and friends gather and will eventually be involved in a homicide. Within Christie's houses, the idea of home perceived as a safe place where to find nurturing and protection is first presented and then drastically undermined. Murder happens in the most secure of the places. The house, in fact, becomes a place to escape from, a precarious shelter. The novels set within the bounded space of a country house totally ignore the towns where the houses are located.

Subsequently, the research has shed a light on the typical countryside village. Rural England comes to life in Christie's fictional villages, ostensible idyllic paradises that offer no refuge from the cruelties of the world. Her most famous village remains St Mary Mead, Miss Marple's home, constructed on her memories of Torquay, her hometown. St Mary Mead cannot be identified with the town of Marple, between Manchester and Stockport, which is believed to have provided the name for the "spinster" detective. Agatha Christie used to stop in Marple – a little town between Manchester and Stockport – during her trips towards the North, when she used to visit her elder sister Madge during the Christmas holiday. In the little station of Marple there is a plaque in memory

of Christie and of Jane Marple, together with ten gigantic book covers remembering the first editions of Miss Marple's novels.

St Mary Mead is a sort of timeless Arcadia inhabited by stock figures: retired army officers, a doctor, the vicar and his family, servants and a large number of unmarried or widowed women devoted to gossip. In St Mary Mead investigation and gossip go together. Miss Marple succeeds in finding the guilty party thanks to her positive use of gossip and thanks to the geographical position of her house and garden. In fact, they are located at the heart of the town, a strategic position where Miss Marple can observe both the space around her and the other characters' movements. Nothing goes unnoticed with Miss Marple. After the Second World War St Mary Mead undergoes many radical changes. From an anonymous tiny village, it becomes a larger town. A new agglomerate of houses is built and dwelt by outsiders, people who do not belong to the village life. Whereas the insiders occupy the central space of the town, the newcomers are relegated to the periphery.

For what concerns the urban space, the research has examined how the city of London is depicted within Christie's oeuvre. The outsider Poirot lives in London, although he is always travelling around Europe solving crimes. What I have gleaned from the analysis of the London novels, is the fact that Christie shapes a London as the epitome of a privileged lifestyle. The attention is laid on the interiors of luxurious suites and apartments, while the ugly realities of the city and its majestic sights are never integrated within the narration. The city space dissolves into the bounded space of the hotels. Although in the London novels Poirot presents a dynamism that is totally absent from those narratives set in rural England, the main events always unfold within an enclosed place. The emphasis, as it occurs with the novels set in country houses or in the English villages, is always laid on the intimate and domestic space. Murder is never a public matter, but it becomes a family business.

Likewise, the same obsession for bounded spaces is to be found in those novels set outside Britain, but still within the borders of the enormous British Empire. The Middle East novels were born after Christie's personal trips to the Orient and capture the influence of her second husband, the archaeologist Max Mallowan. After their marriage, the author often accompanied the husband

during his excavation trips. The novels set in the Orient are constructed on the gap between the western characters, their stereotypes and prejudices on one side, and the oriental people on the other, who cover very peripheral roles – just like the servants in villages and country houses. The novels I examined unfold within enclosed locales, varying from a cruise ship on the Nile – which becomes a sort of country house in motion – an archaeological expedition house – which outwardly is an Arabian building but it is structured as an ideal English mansion – a tourist campsite and an Egyptian household of ancient Egypt. These are places that emphasise the isolation of the characters. The stress is always laid on the intimate space of action, whether on a cruise ship or in a tourist campsite.

Finally, the last locale I have considered is the train compartment. Trains provide the author with a new way of isolating the characters within a circumscribed bounded space, which recalls Edgar Allan Poe's locked rooms. The novels set in motion present a very strong dynamism: the train moves in space between borders, but within its compartment there is a small community of strangers. Hence, the dynamic movements of the train contrasts with the stillness of the interior space. The motif of the isolation finds its best expression within those novels set in transit. However, although the train is at first presented as a sort of anonymous non-place where strangers meet but do not interact with each other, in the end Christie transforms it into a real place. It becomes a sort of country house on rails and its passengers, in the end, are uncovered as members of the same household.

The analysis of a selection of her novels – a selection was due to the fact that Christie wrote sixty-six detective novels – has disclosed that Christie's oeuvre has always privileged the domestic and intimate space. Her fondness of country houses has affected her narratives to a point that every geographical locale, whether in Egypt or in London, or in the English countryside or in a train compartment, recalls the bounded space of an ideal house, with its structure and closeness. In her *Autobiography*, the author admits that her crave for country houses dates back to her childhood, when playing with the dolls' house was her main distraction. It is an obsession that has accompanied the author throughout her long life. However, although scholars usually associate her with

the country house, her novels diverge in settings, but the structure she employs is always the same: a bounded place where a small assembly of people with no direct contact with the outside world is involved in a crime. Whether on a train or aboard a cruise ship, the anxiety at the core of the narration is always the same: the known and familiar world reveals its uncanny side.

The milieus I have considered in this study reveal the author's intent to create a geography based on her personal experiences. Christie, in fact, writes about locales she knows and has visited. The country house, the rural village, the city of London, the Orient and the train symbolise different – but interrelated – stages of her life. The country house of Ashfield in Torquay where she was born and bred has affected her narratives and her life until the purchase of the dream house Greenway. Her train trips to nearby villages to visit relatives have always fascinated her. The several years spent in London during different periods of her long life have resulted in those novels set in the capital city. Her journeys to the Middle East – often by the Orient Express – and her subsequent marriage with the archaeologist Max Mallowan have left their marks in those novels set in the Orient. At the same time, Christie creates a world that the reader could easily recognize. The commuter train, the rural village, London, the country house belonged to the British culture and heritage. They were places that the average reader had at least experienced once. Even the trips abroad were becoming much more common in the period between the two world wars, although it was not an everyday practice yet. Hence, Christie writes about places she shares with her reading audience. The familiarity the author and the readers have with those places was reassuring for the reading public, during a difficult historic period when reading offered an easy escape from the ugly realities of those years.

The emphasis on the bounded space of the narration – which recalls the intimate space of the house – is often conveyed through the recurrent use of maps. Christie enriches the narration with maps since the beginning of her career. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* presents not one but two maps: the house plan and the murder scene. Maps are found in subsequent novels, but the author has abandoned the practice in later years. Maps in Christie's oeuvre cover a fundamental role: they delimit the space of the action, suggesting the

very place where the murder is committed, investigated and eventually solved. Thus, the maps isolate the space where the events unfold, excluding from the narration the outside world. What is not included within the borders of the map is not part of the investigation. The bounded space of the narration is reduced to manageable dimensions, as in Edgar Allan Poe's locked rooms.

Most of Christie's maps depict plans of interiors, house plans or a map of one single room, but there are also maps of villages – St Mary Mead – and of other enclosed locales, such as train compartments. Maps invite the reader to enter and investigate the narrative space side by side with the detective. They provide important spatial information for both the detective in charge of the case and for the average reader. In fact, the maps activate the reader response and stimulate his/her imagination. The reader – and the detective – must locate the characters' movements within the narrative space, since, to quote Stephen Knight, "not only objects have proper places […] people too can be located."[232] The reader must analyse the map and the closed circle of suspects in an attempt to find the murderer, who is never an outsider. The uncanny feeling that the guilty party is 'one of us' pervades every Christie's novel. In the end, the culprit is the one who falsifies his/her position within the borders of the map. The maps that I have considered in my research have revealed that the detective often occupies the central position within the space of the narration. For instance, in the map of St Mary Mead, Miss Marple's house dominates the town core, while Poirot in *Murder on the Orient Express* dwells in a berth right at the centre of the train compartment. This central position provides the detective – and the reader who plays the detective – with an overall view of the surrounding space. Moreover, it symbolises the centrality the detective holds in the development of the events.

As any other novelists, Christie fictionalises the real world; in addition, her maps increase the realistic dimension of the narrated space. For instance, St Mary Mead – a fictitious village – presents aspects that denote any English rural town of the first half of the 20th century. At the same time, her country houses are a fictionalised version of the real mansions typical of the British tradition.

[232] Stephen Knight, *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, cit., p. 120.

Hence, the verisimilitude of the places she writes about is achieved with maps and through the repetition of place-names. The most striking example remains the town of St Mary Mead, which serves as a background to Miss Marple's adventures to a point that it is impossible to imagine St Mary Mead without the spinster detective. The fictitious town of Market Basin, to give another example, is mentioned in several novels, whereas other locations are employed twice in her career, to increase the familiarity the reader has with them. It is the case with the country house of Style Court and with that of Chimneys.

I have observed through the reading of her novels that spatiality in Christie is conveyed not only though the strategic use of maps, but also through her titles. *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Death on the Nile*, *The Body in the Library*, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, *Murder on the Orient Express, At Bertram's Hotel, The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and so on, demonstrate the spatiality infused in her titles. The titles, as the maps, suggest the very place where the events take place. Since Agatha Christie never offers a detailed description of the physical scene, the titles help the reader locate the narration. Hence, the reader can imagine from the title that a train is involved in *Murder on the Orient Express*, while a cruise ship represents the main setting in *Death on the Nile*. The reader knows where Christie is taking her/him, and this is all that counts. The remaining information and the filling in of the blank spaces of the maps are to be obtained by the reader through an accurate examination of the narrative space. The reader's geographical knowledge must complete the creative process undertaken by the author. As Sally Bushell has observed, space in every literary text happens twice: for the characters moving within the narrative space and for the reader who activates "a work of literature through the act of reading."[233]

In conclusion, Christie's five most recurrent settings examined in this research – the country house, the village, the city of London, the Orient and the train – share the author's obsession for intimacy and closeness. Each one of them, whether in London or in Iraq, is geographically isolated from the rest of

[233] Sally Bushell, "Mapping Fiction: Spatialising the Literary Work", in *Literary Mapping in the Digital Era*, eds. David Cooper, Christopher Donaldson and Patricia Murietta-Flores. London, UK: Routledge 2016, p. 142.

society. Crimes and vices comes from within and murder becomes a family matter, even when it might appear as a public affair. Thus, every locale is nothing more than a fragile shelter, where something violent is going to happen. There is no refuge. It is this fear that keeps the readers in tension. The uncanny feeling that what was known and familiar has been drastically violated is the main theme of Christie's narratives. Christie's bounded places uncover predatory relationships, liars and unscrupulous murderers. Revenge, betrayal and deception transform even the most secure of the settings into a dangerous, bloody place.

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