Theoretical Approaches to the Genre

In recent years the detective genre has been the site of every form of critical inquiry and theoretical postulation. Although there may still be those who disdain the mystery novel and its heirs, specialists in modern literature, film, and popular culture have clearly found the detective story a congenial object of study. Exploring the nature of the genre, its audience, and its relationship to other literary forms has become almost as much of a cottage industry as the writing of detective fiction itself. The essays in this first section give a theoretical overview of important issues about the modern detective and provide a background for subsequent essays. Fundamental to any discussion of the topic is an understanding of the classic detective, and each of these essays attempts an explanation of aspects of the classic detective to define how the genre has evolved.

In the first essay, John G. Cawelti traces the history and development of the detective story as it relates to the "canon" of English and American literature. He explores the new directions literary criticism has taken in the past decade and indicates the extent to which the detective story plot has served as a repository of important social and cultural attitudes. His essay both describes the past and points to the future of the genre.

The rise of the detective novel closely parallels the development of police forces as we know them and the reliance on scientific techniques that we deem basic to modern life. This truism is explored in Timothy Boyd and Carolyn Higbie's "Shamus-a-um," in which their play on the word classical centers on those recent detective novels about figures from ancient Greece and Rome who embody the "classic" characteristics of the ratiocinative or the hard-boiled schools. Using three books, one each by Margaret Doody, John Maddox Roberts, and Lindsey Davis, Boyd, and Higbie raise larger questions about historical fiction as they follow classical detectives who investigate crimes that
may have little relevance in today's world within legal systems that operated so differently from our own. Nevertheless, as Boyd and Higbie conclude, Doody, Roberts, and Davis have written texts "based upon enduring motives—greed and ambition—which then spark enduring crimes—murder and theft."

Using object-relations psychology as his means of investigating the classic detective, Timothy Prchal asks questions about why people read detective fiction. Rejecting the long-held interpretations of Pederson-Krag and others that reading detective fiction links one to infantile conflicts, Prchal suggests that detective characters contribute to a reader's "psychological adaptation to the challenges and demands of day-to-day living." The "ideal imago" (in Michael Eigen's term) detectives, known more for themselves than for the actual crimes they solve, uphold the moral code in a disordered world and help explain the wide variety of mature readers who make detective fiction so popular.

The nature of narrative underlies Peter Hühn's and Ann and John Thompson's otherwise very different approaches. By analyzing three examples of mystery fiction, Hühn explores how the principle of secrecy—shared by the crime story and the detection story—motivates the detective plot yet is maintained even when the variations are as extreme as they are in Agatha Christie's Curtain: Poirot's Last Case, John Le Carré's The Spy Who Came in from the Cold, and Ruth Rendell's A Judgement in Stone. For Ann Thompson and John Thompson the concept of metonymy is an analytical tool for exploring all detective fiction, but especially that type they call the "whoizzit," in which the unmasking of a suspect in disguise is necessary to solving the crime. First exploring the relationship between resemblance/similarity (metaphor) and contiguity (metonymy), the Thompsons subsequently use Margaret Millar's How Like an Angel to show how contiguity can "constitute a deepening of the investigative genre."

Janice MacDonald's "Parody and Detective Fiction" and Kathleen Belin Owen's essay on the postmodern detective operate from the same base: that the seeds of the contemporary detective were sown in the first mystery stories and their earliest epigones. For MacDonald, parody, a literary device that is not just a form of ridicule, helps to define the form and its development. Noting Jacques Lacan's idea that "the detective's actions parody those of the murderer," MacDonald argues that the classic formulas established by Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, Fergus Hume, and Arthur Conan Doyle embody parody at the outset—to some degree to distinguish their writing from others' and to establish their work as somehow superior to the genre as a whole. Owen's contention, like MacDonald's, is that "the traditional detective genre... possesses several traits that have equipped it with the beginnings of postmodernity," one trait indeed being parody. The genre's "game rule" structure constantly provides the opportunity to subvert the formulas so clearly set down in the form's progenitors, and subversion is basic to a postmodern detective. Douglas Adams's Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency provides Owen's postmodern gloss on the classic attributes of the detective's eccentricity, investigation of truth, and solution arrived at by rational explanation. Owen asserts that "the detective is alive and well in the postmodern
age"; these essays suggest both that detective criticism is similarly alive and well and that, pace Edmund Wilson, many people care not only who killed Roger Ackroyd but also how and why.
For the better part of the twentieth century, Agatha Christie has been perhaps the most popular, and certainly the best-selling, mystery writer in the world. Until the past ten years, little critical attention has been paid to what exactly constitutes her appeal, the nature of her art, and the relationship between the author, her readers, and her literary heirs. In the essays that follow, contemporary critics approach Christie from a variety of perspectives and shed new light on what now we may regard as a complex relationship between the author and her world. Further, this section seeks to explore the contemporary British detective fiction that shares the "classic" structure Christie (and her progenitors) developed. It considers too other modern writers who employ techniques and venues similar to Christie's but depart radically from her emphasis on puzzles and solutions in order to explore the insoluble mysteries of the human psyche that earlier detective fiction only faintly implied.

Robert Merrill's detailed, intriguing study of Christie's "games" and "plots" seeks to answer the basic question commonly raised about Christie: whether her work does warrant serious critical attention. Robin Woods's essay examines the fate of Christie's famous detective, Hercule Poirot, in her last novel, Curtain, and indicates how the author's resolution of the plot and her detective's fate points to a new kind of crime genre of the mid 1970s—the true-crime novel, featuring motiveless murder with psychopathic villains. In a different vein, Ina Rae Hark suggests that Christie's texts are far more sophisticated than readers have generally perceived them, that, indeed, there were always present the deeper psychological strata so pervasive in detective fiction today. For Christie, Hark indicates, no such creature as a person incapable of murder exists, a pervasive theme, as she points out, in the films of Alfred Hitchcock. In a historical-cultural approach to Christie's popularity, Mary Anne Ackershoek explores the
social change in England after World War I, particularly as it affected women's lives. She finds in Christie's novels an example of the shift from a male-author-dominated genre to one where women writers expressed new attitudes toward British society, and particularly toward the role of traditional authority figures. Rather than viewing Christie as upholding British upper-class attitudes, Ackershoek sees in her novels the country manors collapsing and concludes that the theme that resonates through her novels is that of the rotting society.

Moving from Christie to her most prominent successor, P. D. James, Carolyn F. Scott finds in John Webster's play, *The Duchess of Malfi*, essential elements in the plot of James's *The Skull beneath the Skin* as well as contributions to the framework of that narrative. Further, she concludes, the Webster play achieves a new resolution itself in the conclusion of James's work. Marnie Jones and Barbara Barker offer a detailed commentary on the world and work of James's prime detective, Adam Dalgleish, who is caught up in the "filthy trade" of crime detection, a profession they believe James suggests is not suitable for anyone.

James's most popular contemporary mystery writer, Ruth Rendell, uses the crime, or the mystery, as an excuse to probe the deepest and darkest secrets hidden in the twisted psyches of her protagonists. Martha Stoddard Holmes focuses on an approach to Rendell through gender, analyzing Rendell's Inspector Wexford novels, which feature as objects of investigation a "host of terrifying women." His investigations of their relations to crimes reveal his own attitudes toward gender as well as his notions about his own masculinity.

In another contemporary critical approach to British detective fiction, Iska S. Alter probes the intersections of presumably fixed categories of class, gender, and sexuality that provoke the very crimes that those fixed categories would seem to preclude. Her subject is Anne Perry's Victorian world, and she offers insight not only into Perry's fictions but also into the buried, suppressed life hidden by an ironic world of masks.

Jasmine Y. Hall offers a key to the two unrelated conclusions of one of the most revered British detective novels, Dorothy Sayers's *Gaudy Nights*, in an illuminating discussion of the ideology underlying the vocation of the detective, Lord Peter Wimsey. In her discussion, she demonstrates that Sayers grafts the genre of the heart (the love story) onto the genre of the mind (the detective story). In the final essay in this section, we move from genre and genre approaches to a cultural-historical study of the middle class of detective fiction: James E. Bartell's thesis is that the hero of detective fiction is an "idealized bureaucrat who speaks directly and deeply to the needs of readers who themselves function as bureaucrats in their jobs or some other aspect of their lives." He goes on to define bureaucracy and its relation to the values of British detective fiction. Bartell's paper takes a wide-ranging view of detective fiction (including Christie's) and its relation to the development of Western bureaucracy as expressed in novels dating from Defoe. Thus, this section concludes by placing in the broadest possible framework the popular phenomenon we have embraced as British detective fiction.
Chirstie’s Narrative Games

Robert Merrill

Agatha Christie continues to appeal to us because she devised intellectual challenges or games of unusual, even unparalleled ingenuity. This remark may seem a virtual commonplace, but it often seems contradicted by critical writing on detective fiction in general and on Christie in particular. General studies tend to emphasize the ideological element in crime fiction (as in books by Dennis Porter and Stephen Knight) or its sociological insights (as in John Cawelti’s discussion of classic detective fiction). Book-length studies of Christie acknowledge her skill as a maker of puzzles but spend very few pages on the subject, preferring instead to stress Christie’s characterizations: Maida and Spornick devote seventeen pages to what they call "The Puzzle-Game" (68-84) eighty-five pages to Christie’s various detectives (85-170); Bargainnier’s chapter on Christie’s plots covers twenty-three pages (144-66), whereas his chapter on her characters runs to 106 pages (38-143); and even Gillian Gill, who offers the best commentary on Christie’s narrative strategies, intersperses her remarks on plot throughout a narrative largely devoted to biographical matters. Thus, we have what seems to me the central irony about Christie’s reputation: Everyone knows that her distinction lies in her clever plots, but no one bothers to say much about them. To explain a Christie plot is apparently equivalent to explaining a joke—not so hard to do, perhaps, but somewhat in poor taste.¹

My own view is that no other approach will tell us much about Christie’s distinction as a detective writer. Our supreme puzzlemaker, Christie succeeds as a maker of engaging plots or does not succeed at all. I adopt the plural form in "games" and "plots" because I think Christie excels in offering successful variations on the classic formula defined by Cawelti and others. Like her peers, Christie introduces her detective, provides a crime and clues, details an investigation, permits her detective to announce his or her solution and to ex-
plain how it was arrived at, and concludes with a denouement consistent with the comic structure and assumptions of her chosen form.\textsuperscript{2} Within this extremely conventional pattern, however, Christie manages to play any number of fascinating narrative games, as I hope to illustrate by discussing several of Christie's more representative plots. This analysis should allow me to distinguish between the narrative patterns that inform the Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple novels, respectively. And it should allow me to conclude by reviewing one of the oldest and perhaps most basic questions about Christie: whether her work really warrants serious critical attention.

**REPRESENTATIVE PLOTS**

My first examples, *Death on the Nile* (1937) and *Evil under the Sun* (1941), might seem to illustrate Christie's lack of originality, for these two Hercule Poirot novels share what appears to be a very similar, if not identical, plot.\textsuperscript{3} In each case the murder victim is a wealthy woman who appears to have taken a handsome young man from his fiancée or wife, though in reality the supposedly estranged couple are plotting this woman's death for financial reasons. In each novel we first observe the couple's efforts to convince the vacationing Poirot that they're indeed estranged. After this fairly elaborate introduction (elaborate by Christie's standards), each novel proceeds to describe a murder for which the estranged couple have what appear to be perfect alibis. At this point in each book Poirot begins to investigate the crime, for which something like a dozen suspects seem plausible solutions. In each case the interrogation turns on opportunity even more than on motive, for it is Poirot's task to explain when and how each murder was committed, as well as by whom and why. In each case, of course, Poirot discovers that the estranged couple are not estranged at all and that the crime was fiendishly premeditated (as Poirot's rather dull companions, Hastings and Race, might put it). In each book Poirot punctures the couple's imperfect alibis and effectively exonerates the other suspects.

Those who have not read these two books but have seen the lavish films based on them (*Death on the Nile*, 1978; *Evil under the Sun*, 1982) will be especially struck by their similarities, for the two films share a plot structure extremely popular with television productions such as *Murder, She Wrote*, innumerable detective novelists throughout the century, and the Christie of such books as *Evil under the Sun*. In this structure nearly every character introduced is a plausible suspect with an equally reasonable motive and opportunity to commit the crime. There are twelve such characters in *Evil under the Sun*, conveniently grouped as the "cast of characters" at the beginning of the book. (I might add that Christie favors this number of suspects—large enough for the desired complexity, not too large to be recalled by an alert reader.) Most of the suspects get about equal attention and space, thus reinforcing the notion that they are equally likely to be guilty. Unlike her film adapters, Christie does not provide
a plausible motive for every character, but she does develop a good many such motives and makes sure that Poirot gives them roughly equal consideration. In books of this kind Poirot becomes an equal opportunity detective who really believes that anyone might commit murder, the jaundiced view of human nature he shares with Jane Marple. The solution to such mysteries often seems somewhat arbitrary, for any number of alternative solutions might have been substituted without changing the work's essential structure.

The narrative game just described has advantages and disadvantages that are closely related. Each character is of interest to us, for each is a genuine suspect. No one can be very fully developed, however, for the very nature of the game requires that Christie spread her attention about equally among her relatively large cast. The ultimate solution is almost always surprising, but it also seems to arise from only a few of the details generated by the detective's investigation. Indeed, most of what we learn in the course of this investigation concerns the now discarded alternative solutions, or red herrings. The resulting sense of superficiality is almost a narrative necessity in a book like Evil under the Sun, for the murderers' ploy is not sufficiently clever to withstand much narrative attention. If we were encouraged to review the actions of Patrick and Christine Redfern more closely than those of the other suspects, we would be all too likely to guess how Patrick might have killed his wealthy lover after he supposedly found her dead body—and once this idea occurs to us, the game is over. So, Christie provides very few details about the Redferns even though they are two-thirds of the love triangle apparently at the heart of the novel's primary action, and she is especially careful to give no hint as to why the Redferns might profit from Arlena Marshall's death. Such tactics of concealment permit a certain kind of narrative game to continue until the novel's final pages, where we learn almost everything of relevance about our killers as well as about the crime Poirot has undertaken to solve. For some readers, the element of surprise is sufficient to carry the day; for others, the arbitrariness of the solution will seem a relatively unsatisfactory climax.

Critics of detective fiction often discuss their subject as if the pattern just described were inevitable—recall Auden's famous essay, "The Guilty Vicarage," or Frye's memorable description of the finger of guilt moving from suspect to suspect until it falls on the true culprit. Many of Christie's best novels employ very different patterns, however, even if these books seem extremely similar otherwise. Death on the Nile is an excellent example. Though this famous whodunit develops the same dramatic situation Christie would later employ in Evil under the Sun, Christie's game here is radically different from that played in the later book.

Death on the Nile belies the claim advanced by Cawelti and others that Christie favors the so-called least likely person in resolving her mysteries. This claim does not fit works such as Evil under the Sun, either, for the Redferns are not obscure figures but simply undistinguished from the other characters. In Death on the Nile, however, Cawelti's claim is all but refuted, for the estranged
Agatha Christie and British Detective Fiction

couple—Jacqueline de Bellefort and Simon Doyle—are the most likely suspects, the ones with the most to gain. Moreover, Christie handles the situation so as to all but assure the experienced reader of detective fiction that Jackie and Simon are not only the most likely suspects but also the actual killers. Her game here is one in which the reader is led to anticipate the final solution but still cannot figure out how the "obvious" murderers managed to achieve their unsavory end. Christie wins this game by allowing us to see very early that Jackie and Simon are the all but certain answers to whodunit, for this accentuates our frustration (and surprise) at being unable to figure out just how they did it.

Christie is fond of implicating the most likely suspect, in fact, as she acknowledges in her autobiography. She takes great delight in seeming to exonerate the "obvious" candidate by means of an apparently unshakable alibi, then revealing this person to be the guilty party after all. (Often, of course, the "person" is actually a couple, always a man and a woman. By Bargainnier’s count, Christie develops this dramatic situation no fewer than nineteen times in her novels [Bargainnier 122]). A good example of the most-likely-suspect ploy is one of her most famous novels, Ten Little Indians (1939) (also known as And Then There Were None). Here, ten people are enticed to a remote island in order to be executed for crimes they committed in the past without punishment. It soon becomes apparent that one of the ten is the executioner, and for most of the novel the reader surely suspects the retired judge, Justice Wargrave, who is known to have been a hanging judge and who seems the one person on the island of sufficient intelligence to plan the very complicated series of executions. But then Wargrave himself is apparently killed, and so the reader must look elsewhere for a solution that does not seem possible. Christie lifts the reader’s all but certain confusion, even bewilderment, only with the final chapter, in which she prints Wargrave’s confession. Christie’s victory, if I may call it that, comes in forcing us to entertain unlikely solutions we cannot dismiss even though we cannot believe in them. After all, we know by the rules of the game that someone must be guilty. Near the end of this novel, however, all ten suspects seem to be exonerated by nothing less than death itself.

In Death on the Nile, by contrast, the likely suspects are never really exonerated. Jackie and Simon are far too prominent throughout to be ignored at the end (for contrary to Cawelti’s casual remarks, Christie seldom takes her primary murderer from the dramatic periphery); and when they turn up with wonderful alibis in the middle of the book, Christie is all but announcing they will ultimately be exposed as the murderers. Indeed, Christie’s focus on this couple, especially Jackie de Bellefort, is nearly unprecedented among the Poirot novels. The jilted lover of Simon Doyle and the betrayed best friend of Linnet Ridgeway Doyle, Jackie is one of Christie’s most fully developed and sympathetic characters. Christie repeatedly brings her together with Poirot, who cautions her not to open her heart to evil and observes her apparent despair with the greatest concern (110-11). The all but complete narrative focus on this love triangle for 120 pages, one of the longest buildups to murder in all of
Christie, virtually assures us that Jackie and Simon will eventually prove to be central to the final solution. When Linnet is murdered precisely as Jackie imagined killing her (64, 128), we should take the event as a virtual confession.

In fact, however, we have 150 pages to go—an elaborate investigation in almost any form of detective fiction. As I have suggested, Christie’s game here is directed at the experienced reader, who can hardly doubt that Jackie and Simon are guilty. I remember all too well reading and rereading the relevant scene in which, somehow, the lovers manage to murder Linnet (116-27), and I especially recall my annoyance at being unable to penetrate the "obvious" deception and guess the method they employed. I also remember my embarrassment at being given another 120 pages to review the evidence and failing to know anything more at the end than I knew at midpoint. Christie seems to pursue this embarrassment with some zeal for she has Poirot repeatedly summarize the evidence in order to highlight the relevant clues, all of which must somehow point back to Jackie and Simon but don’t seem to do so (see especially 216, 242-43). Indeed, Christie plays with us throughout, as when she allows Colonel Race to offer a list of no fewer than fourteen suspects—none of whom is Jackie or Simon (177)—or when she develops the other suspects so carelessly or perfunctorily no serious reader can entertain them for a moment (one so-called suspect, a man named Fleetwood, enters the book at page 149, while more plausible candidates such as Pennington are effectively exposed well before the murder is even committed). Further, she allows her murderers practically to announce their conspiracy by having the rather dull Simon employ Jackie’s metaphor of the sun eclipsing the moon to describe what Linnet has done to Jackie—a figure he obviously got from Jackie herself, despite their supposed estrangement (61-62, 67). This whole structure depends, of course, on the unusual ingenuity of the crime, which must withstand 150 pages of scrutiny. This structure permits Christie to have her cake and eat it too, for she works out her remarkably deceptive puzzle while continuing to focus on the most important characters of the novel’s early chapters. This attention to Jackie and Simon allows Christie’s conclusion to seem dramatically as well as intellectually satisfying, for the resolution involves characters and dramatic situations we have followed from the novel’s first pages. Death on the Nile has many weaknesses, but it is perhaps Christie’s finest example of a novel that combines the essential features of drama with those of a narrative puzzle. The narrative game played here seems to me one of Christie’s most sophisticated gambits, ultimately nothing like the game she plays in Evil under the Sun.

Evil under the Sun, Death on the Nile, and Ten Little Indians offer specific examples of Christie’s versatility as a puzzlemaker. I believe that another ten to fifteen works can be adduced as successful variations on the conventional formula with which Christie is identified. These books fall along a narrative spectrum largely determined by the likeliness of the novel’s murderer. At one end of the spectrum are those books in which the murderer is indeed the least likely suspect, not because he or she is an unnoticed servant or a distant relative
but because he or she appears to be the intended victim or is a member of the investigating team. At midpoint on this spectrum are books such as *Evil under the Sun*, in which most of the characters are at least plausible solutions to the puzzle. At the other end of the spectrum is *Death on the Nile*, the most extreme instance of a book in which Christie focuses on and finally incriminates the most likely suspect(s). Books such as *Ten Little Indians* fall between *Evil under the Sun* and *Death on the Nile*, though closer to the latter than to the former. To place Christie's works along this spectrum allows us to identify the more crucial details of her plots and to highlight the strategies that inform her more interesting books.

Critics as diverse as Dennis Porter, George Grella, and Dorothy Sayers agree that "the Least Likely Person ploy," as Maida and Spornick call it (Maida and Spornick 40), is the standard device in classic detective fiction (Porter 137; Grella 86; Sayers 82). Indeed, Sayers refers to this ploy as already old hat in 1928, at least in the form in which the guilty party is simply ignored until the conclusion (Sayers 106). Christie herself has her fictional counterpart, Ariadne Oliver, exclaim, "It's always the least likely person who did it" (*Cards on the Table* 145), and Christie's critics have tended to see her use of this tactic as "notorious" (Bargainnier 123) and as nothing less than her "trademark" (Maida and Spornick 40). In truth, however, Christie almost never employs this device unless the killer appears to be the intended victim (as in *Peril at End House* [1932], *An Overdose of Death* [1936], *A Murder Is Announced* [1950], and *The Mirror Crack'd* [1962]) or figures among the investigators (as in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* [1926], *The ABC Murders* [1936], and *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* [1938]). In these rather special cases, the murderer is not so much the least likely suspect as never suspected at all, so it is misleading to say, with Cawelti, that in such books "the guilt [is] finally projected onto someone on the edge or outside the magic circle" (Cawelti 77), someone who is "marginal" to the book and its central society (Cawelti 93). For such formulations imply that Christie typically settles for a peripheral, "marginal" figure whose guilt conveniently allows the main characters and their comfortable social order to emerge unscathed and, if anything, reaffirmed. Gillian Gill rightly objects that Christie "never keeps her readers in suspense for 200 pages only to cop out at the end by pinning the crime on a person whose motivation has been wholly obscure" (Gill 136), though novels like *Peril at End House* do fight very hard to keep us from looking at the murderer as a suspect and thus as someone whose motivation is as dark as it is more or less available. One should never say never, however, and the occasional novel in which Christie does settle for the marginal outsider whose motivation is obscure is the exception that proves the rule. In *Dead Man's Mirror* (1936), for example, Miss Lingard is the most inconspicuous and least likely suspect among the eight people interviewed by Poirot, and her uncovering is one of Christie's least effective conclusions. Novels like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Peril at End House* are of course much more famous and more satisfying, but I think it is fair to note the element of the
arbitrary that clings to these unusual and far from "typical" Christie texts.

Far more common are the books that lodge near the center of Christie's spectrum, books in which the murderer is but one (or two) of many plausible suspects. For this kind of book Gill's comment is altogether just, for Christie virtually never forbids us access to the motive and clues by which her detective (usually Poirot) discovers the guilty party among ten or so genuinely possible solutions. Well over half of Christie's detective novels fall close to the center of her spectrum, but it is worth remarking that, so far as I can tell, only one book falls absolutely at dead center. Only once, in *Cards on the Table* (1936), does Christie play a version of her game in which all the suspects are equally plausible. In books like *Evil under the Sun* it is all but inevitable that some suspects are slightly more likely than others, either because of their closer connections to the victim, the nature of their motive or opportunity to commit the crime, or the narrative attention devoted to them either before the murder or during the investigation. In *Cards on the Table* all suspects get virtually equal treatment in what Christie notes in her introduction is a narrative experiment. Surely, it is no accident that the book has only four suspects (the lowest number in any Christie novel), for perfectly equal treatment for a dozen suspects would give Christie's novels an absolute symmetry and totally artificial character only someone like Poirot could appreciate.

As Christie noted, her fondness for whodunits in which "somebody obvious" is finally proven guilty (after apparently being exonerated) (*Autobiography* 242), it should not surprise us that a number of her best novels fall at the "most obvious" end of her narrative spectrum. If *Ten Little Indians* and *Death on the Nile* are famous examples, *Lord Edgware Dies* (1934) and *The Hollow* (1946) are additional instances drawn from the Poirot canon. (Indeed, *The Hollow* is one of Christie's most interesting books, as I shall briefly argue in my conclusion). Among the Miss Marple novels almost any book might be cited, as Bargainnier notes (Bargainnier 74), but *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), *The Body in the Library* (1942), and *The Mirror Crack'd* amply confirm Miss Marple's own opinion that "it is always the obvious person who has done the crime" (*The Mirror Crack'd* 179). In all these novels, but especially *Death on the Nile* and *The Hollow*, Christie must practice a conspicuous art to achieve a surprising effect when her culprit is "the obvious answer," as Poirot remarks of *The Hollow*'s Gerda Christow a full hundred pages before he reveals that she is, indeed, guilty (*The Hollow* 153). The key is to exonerate the murderer convincingly (as in *Ten Little Indians*) to merge the most likely suspect with others almost as plausible (as in *The Body in the Library*), or to all but flaunt the most likely solution while continuing to mystify us as to the means by which the crime was committed (as in *Death on the Nile*). More extended study of Christie's games might well focus on this end of her narrative spectrum, for no one has written this kind of detective novel quite so well.
HERCULE POIROT AND MISS MARPLE

A complete analysis of Christie's narrative games would proceed to place all her detective novels along the spectrum I have posited. I would like to pursue a more realistic goal, that of summarizing two broad narrative patterns typical of the thirty-three Poirot novels and the twelve Miss Marple novels, respectively. The games played in the two series are as different as the two detectives themselves, and even a brief review should point up the attractive diversity of Christie's narratives.

The Poirot novels range from 1920 to 1975, but the many texts invariably share a number of features designed to set off their little Belgian detective. Poirot is almost always introduced early, usually with the task of solving a murder committed within the first one hundred pages. (In this respect Death on the Nile is atypical, for the first murder occurs after more than 120 pages of preparation. Though it follows much the same pattern, Evil under the Sun provides fewer details and arrives at the murder after sixty-five pages. Indeed, the one hundred pages typically employed allow for great variation, from novels in which Poirot is summoned to a body almost at once to novels in which there is "a considerable lead-up to the murder," as Robert Barnard puts it [Barnard, 101]). Poirot's subsequent investigation takes up most of the novel. With the aid of his Watson-like companion (often Hastings, but sometimes a policeman), Poirot investigates the many suspects, discusses the more important clues, ponders alternative scenarios, and in general uncovers and then analyzes the relevant information. Though he never provides a complete analysis (until the end, of course), Poirot does identify and sift through virtually all relevant clues. The supreme rationalist (even more so than Holmes), Poirot pursues his solution relentlessly, and the same can be said of the novels in which he appears. Poirot's problem is always complicated, what with his need to assimilate a dozen suspects and the numerous clues they generate into his resolution of the affair. The narrative game is one in which we are invited to follow Poirot through each step of this process. Lest we overlook significant clues, Christie offers Poirot's periodical recapitulations of the more important details to be brought together in the solution. This game stresses ingenuity, for everything is on the table, so to speak, and must therefore be sufficiently complex to defy the clever reader's best efforts to anticipate Poirot's analysis.

Christie's critics have tended to dismiss the idea that her readers actually try to best Poirot at his own game, but the format of the Poirot novels all but requires us to play the same game as Poirot, even if we almost never "win." Indeed, to win would be to lose, for to unravel the crime before Poirot would expose the plot's inadequate ingenuity. Nonetheless, the reader must make such an effort simply to follow the narrative thread, which traces Poirot's efforts to put the case together from the right angle; inevitably, then, the reader ends up playing Poirot's game. Christie acknowledges the pattern to which I point when she says that she "ruined" The Hollow by introducing Poirot (Autobiography
The Hollow includes psychological studies that are independent of and perhaps in competition with the problem-solving spirit of the Poirot game, as we might call it. Excellent as it is, The Hollow fails to develop fully its psychological insights because it must also attend to Poirot’s investigation, and the latter is less fully developed than in many other Poirot novels because the focus is not exclusively on Poirot’s evolving theories concerning the murder. Unlike The Hollow, then, most of the Poirot novels highlight Poirot’s step-by-step analysis of the investigation. I would add that the Poirot novels require that Christie play as fair as possible with the clues; after all, the informing pattern emphasizes the availability of all relevant data. This is why readers of Death on the Nile rightly moan when Poirot first mentions the incriminating contents of Linnet Doyle’s nail polish and the discovery of a third bullet during his final explanation of the crime (259-60, 266). These late additions to the evidence are not in the essential spirit of the game played whenever Poirot is our detective.

The Jane Marple novels develop a very different kind of game. Unlike Poirot, Miss Marple is almost never the primary investigator. The most extreme example is The Moving Finger (1942), in which Miss Marple does not appear until page 142 of a 198-page novel and then figures in only eleven pages before the ten-page conclusion in which she explains her solution. Elsewhere, as in The Murder at the Vicarage, The Mirror Crack’d, and At Bertram’s Hotel (1965), Miss Marple is introduced early but then appears intermittently through the rest of the book as we primarily follow the stages of the police investigation. In books like A Murder Is Announced and A Pocket Full of Rye (1953), Miss Marple first appears after some eighty pages devoted to the murder and the principal suspects. In the rather typical case of A Pocket Full of Rye, this means that Miss Marple arrives on the scene fully halfway through the book. As the murder occurs almost on the first page, Miss Marple also arrives halfway through the official investigation, conducted here by Inspector Neele. In the novel’s later sections, we are privy to a few of Miss Marple’s conversations with the other characters, but her inquiries are often summarized, and the dramatized conversations hardly seem like interrogations. The official investigation is more thorough, or apparently so, and does produce information useful to us and, later, to Miss Marple herself. We know, however, that the inspector’s inferences are almost certain to be imperfect, and we do not know what line of approach Miss Marple is pursuing in her apparently random fashion. The game is therefore very un-Poirotish. The relevant clues are only sometimes before us, the alternative scenarios are produced only at the end, when Inspector Neele and Miss Marple finally exchange views, and the lines of inquiry actively pursued by the police can be assumed to be inaccurate. (Thus, Neele’s suspicions about Mary Dove virtually assure us that she is not the murderer, and Neele’s preference for Percival as opposed to Lance Fortescue points to Lance as the more likely suspect). The trick is to figure out, or intuit, the direction in which Miss Marple is headed. There are fewer suspects and clues, as indeed there must be, given our distance from the crucial evidence, but
arriving at Miss Marple's solutions is still much more difficult than arriving at Poirot's.

The Miss Marple books are, in fact, almost impossible to "solve," for the game played stresses mystification rather than deduction. Caroline Sheppard, Miss Marple's prototype, is said to solve her problems by "inspired guesswork" (The Murder of Roger Ackroyd 15), and the same might be said of Miss Marple. The most extreme instance is What Mrs. McGillicuddy Saw! (1957), in which, as Barnard points out, "Miss Marple apparently solves the crime by divine guidance, for there is very little in the way of clues or logical deduction" (Barnard 193). In truth, however, the Miss Marple novels never emulate the pattern of the Poirot novels, a pattern Barnard deftly defines as "progressive mystification and progressive enlightenment" (Barnard 115), for there is little "enlightenment" to balance the rather dense "mystification" until the end, where we usually are reminded "how much Miss Marple knew all along and never told anyone" (Hart 78). At the end, of course, the mysterious Miss Marple clarifies everything in the manner of a spinsterish Sherlock Holmes and by means almost as unfair to the attentive reader as Doyle's.

These last remarks will seem very harsh to those who love Miss Marple and the novels in which she appears. For many readers, the Miss Marple novels are Christie's best, focusing as they do on a smaller, more fully developed cast of characters and relying on fewer plot turns of an ingenious but improbable nature. For such readers, it is to Christie's credit that she does not have Miss Marple constantly recapitulate the crucial clues and possible solutions; when she does resort to this tactic (briefly, in A Murder Is Announced 227), the echo of the Poirot novels may simply seem intrusive. Readers who prefer Miss Marple to Poirot are perhaps a bit like Caroline Sheppard, who wants to know many things about Poirot: "where he comes from, what he does, whether he is married, what his wife was, or is, like, whether he has children, what his mother's maiden name was—and so on" (The Murder of Roger Ackroyd 25). The Poirot novels are structured to frustrate Caroline's desires, of course; and while we also learn little about Miss Marple's history, we come to know her tastes and character in ways that satisfy this most basic readerly instinct. The Miss Marple novels are punctuated with fine moments in which the heroine's endearing character is crucial to our experience of the book if not to the solution to the crime. My own favorite comes on the last page of A Pocket Full of Rye. Here Miss Marple's hypothesis concerning Lance Fortescue's deception of Gladys Martin is confirmed by a photograph Gladys sends Miss Marple through the mail. Miss Marple first feels pity for Gladys and then anger at Lance's heartlessness; then, "displacing both these emotions, there came a surge of triumph—the triumph some specialist might feel who has successfully reconstructed an extinct animal from a fragment of jawbone and a couple of teeth" (A Pocket Full of Rye 186). This wonderful moment captures Miss Marple's essential pride and toughness, even as it testifies to the range of human responses we find in her and not in Poirot. Readers alert to such moments will
perhaps not care so much that the narrative games played in the Miss Marple novels are less interesting than those in the best of the Poirot novels; indeed, they may feel that my judgment simply expresses one reader's (one gamesplayer's) taste for a certain kind of intellectual competition. In any case, the differences between the Poirot and the Miss Marple novels confirm Christie's ability to fashion complex and markedly different variations within the classic detective novel.

CHRISTIE AS A WRITER

Ironically enough, no one has spoken more eloquently about the limitations of detective fiction than Dorothy Sayers, one of the form's ablest practitioners. Throughout her omnibus review of detective fiction, Sayers notes the inherent restrictions imposed by the form and concludes that no "serious" work can be done within its boundaries: "For, make no mistake about it, the detective story is part of the literature of escape, and not of expression" (Sayers 109). Like the form's most vehement advocates and detractors, Sayers believes that in detective fiction "the primary interest is in the process of solution" (Bargainnier 8)—and how can we take seriously a form that resolutely pursues the ends of a crossword puzzle?

Insofar as this question is asked of fiction like Christie's (as opposed to Chandler's, say, or Le Carré's), it is perhaps unanswerable. Indeed, we do not take it seriously, or very few of us do. The number of readers who stand Christie next to their favorite "serious" authors must be a tiny fraction of her legendary readership. Christie offers a complicated but extremely artificial form of diversion (thus my notion of an intellectual challenge or game). Some people like bridge, and some do not. It is hardly a matter of being right or wrong; either one plays the game and enjoys it or one does not. As someone who both chooses to play and enjoys Christie's game(s), I think it is useful to understand why we are taken with fictions like Christie's. Christie's claims on us are not those of a major novelist, but this does not alter the fact that she did what she did as well as anyone has ever done.

We might conclude by asking why Christie is superior to her classic competitors. Gill amusingly cites the explanations of others: that Christie is "not too intellectual, not too biased, not too complicated, not too descriptive, not too long, not too ambitious, not too theoretical, not too feminine, not too topical, etc." (Gill 227). I think that Gill dismisses these "explanations" a bit abruptly, for there is some truth to the claim that Christie does not make uncomfortable demands on us and so keeps us coming back for book after book in her particular vein. But, of course, there must also be some positive reason for Christie's phenomenal success. In my own discussion I have tried to substantiate the obvious: Christie's uncanny grasp of the plot variations available within the conventional detective format. I would add that at her best Christie manages to include serious fictional elements within her artificial constructs. Though several
of Christie's better-known works are famous (or infamous) for their bizarre conclusions (in particular, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and *Murder on the Orient Express* [1934]), Christie's better works often depend on relatively serious literary techniques for their unique effects.

Here I can only point to several major examples. I have already noted that in *Death on the Nile* it is essential to Christie's narrative strategy that she develop Jackie de Bellefort as an interesting, sympathetic character (and killer). In *Evil under the Sun*, on the other hand, Christie has Christine Redfern play much the same role as inconspicuously as possible, for she cannot afford to give either Patrick or Christine Redfern much "exposure" within the game she plays in this novel. *Death on the Nile* is a happy example of a book in which Christie does much more with her murderer than detective novelists typically manage to do, in large part because the narrative structure itself requires that we come to care a good deal (if not deeply) for the murderer.

*The Hollow* and *Ten Little Indians* also illustrate Christie's use of techniques we usually identify with serious fiction. In each case, Christie again devises a detective plot in which she is required to do interesting things with character or (in *Ten Little Indians*) the image of human nature projected by the novel as a whole. As I remarked earlier, *The Hollow* is one of Christie's most interesting books from a psychological point of view, including as it does a number of character studies far more extensive and compelling than we usually find in classic detective fiction. One such study is the murderer herself, Gerda Christow. We do not come to know Gerda as intimately as we come to know her husband, John Christow, or John's mistress, Henrietta Savernake, for the Poirot game cannot be stretched so far as to permit access to the murderer's thoughts after she commits the crime. We do enter Gerda's mind early in the book, however, and with striking effects. For example, Gerda’s much-remarked stupidity is apparently confirmed in the early sections narrated from her point of view (*The Hollow* 31-33, 41-44, 49, 61-62, 67), and Gerda's obviously sincere adulation for her husband cleverly diverts suspicion when she is later discovered standing over John's dead body. Gerda’s sections fit naturally into a book in which much of the narrative is told not from Poirot's perspective but from the points of view of the suspects. These early sections help Christie flesh out a very interesting whodunit in which the killer is a relatively average, uncalculating woman, not the obsessive mastermind whose convoluted plans dominate most such works. Read in retrospect, these sections also confirm Gerda's own later opinion about herself ("I'm not quite so stupid as everyone thinks" [*The Hollow* 243]), thus permitting Christie to reverse the logic by which Gerda, "the obvious answer," is dismissed as a suspect because she is too dense to contrive a murder scheme.

In *Ten Little Indians* Christie also tells her story from the points of view of the ten suspects, for there is no detective throughout the body of the book. Here we learn relatively little about each character, and no one is developed as thoroughly as, say, Henrietta Savernake. What we do learn is extremely relevant
to the detective puzzle, however, as well as to the vision of life embodied in the book. In his confession, Justice Wargrave notes that he alone among the ten people brought to Indian Island is not guilty of an earlier murder for which he was not punished (Ten Little Indians, 182). This perceptive comment points back to one of the most interesting discoveries we make in reading the several sections narrated by the suspects: Each of them is guilty of some form of murder. This discovery makes us suspicious of each character in turn, but Wargrave is right to suggest that it should in fact clear the character in question in the present crisis. This striking revelation about each suspect also contributes to the book's extremely unsentimental character. Here, for once, Christie deals with an unpleasant bunch of people who do not turn out to be anything but the hypocrites and actual killers Wargrave takes them to be. (I refer to Christie's novel, of course, not the dramatic and film versions. Alas, Christie herself revised the stage version to exonerate two of the ten characters, conveniently enough a young man and a young woman who could then participate in a kind of happy ending. It should surprise no one that all three film versions have retained the revised and not the original plot.) Ten Little Indians is thus one of Christie's coldest, most precise studies in human venality, unredeemed by the detective's saving competence (indeed, the crime would never have been solved if Wargrave's pride had not driven him to write up an explanation of how he fooled everyone). Among classic detective novels, this book seems to me to stand as one study in scarlet that serious readers and not just detective addicts can reread with pleasure.

I am tempted to end by noting that a final reason to study Christie is to appreciate the ways in which her successors—Chandler and Le Carré, but also Hammett, Macdonald, and many contemporary novelists—adapt the form she perfected to more serious literary uses. Such study is certain to be rewarding, for the writers in question do not so much transcend as revise the conventions we associate with Agatha Christie. I am reluctant to end by deflecting interest from Christie to those who followed her, however, for I continue to think that Christie's work is rich enough to reward even more detailed critical analysis than the one offered here. To engage in such study is to risk being called an addict or fan, but I suspect that Christie's academic readers are more than willing to live with such labels.

NOTES

My thanks to Randall Reid, Susan Baker, and Dotty Merrill for reading versions of this paper.

1. The major exception to my generalization is Robert Barnard, whose A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie (1980) is littered with shrewd comments about Christie's strategies.

2. I am summarizing Cawelti's presentation of the classic formula; see Cawelti, 82.
3. This resemblance is noted by others, especially Barnard, who refers to their "virtually identical plots" (Barnard 67).

4. Christie's actual words are as follows: "The whole point of a good detective story was that it must be somebody obvious but at the same time, for some reason, you would then find that it was not obvious, that he could not possibly have done it. Though really, of course, he had done it" (Autobiography 242).

5. See Death on the Nile 63. Unless otherwise noted, future page references are to this edition.

6. Barnard astutely remarks that "the ones never suspected" is a better formulation than "the least likely suspect[s]" in describing Christie's practice (Barnard 39). He would apply this phrase to books in which the culprits are first suspected, then exonerated, and finally uncovered, however, so "never suspected" doesn't seem quite right, either.

7. Charles Osborne notes that Miss Lingard is indeed the "most unlikely" suspect (Osborne 104).

8. Grossvogel, for example, says that "one must assume that only an infinitesimally small number of Agatha Christie's half-billion readers ever undertook or expected to solve her stories in advance of Jane Marple or Hercule Poirot" (Grossvogel 254); and Grella stresses the "display" of a mastermind's work, as opposed to any serious effort to get us to compete with the detective: "These novels do not so much challenge human ingenuity as display it to its furthest limits" (Grella 86).

9. Barnard explicitly shares my own preference for the Poirot novels as intellectual puzzles, for almost all his favorite Christies are Poirots; see his "Annotated List," 187-206. I would think this view is a common one among mystery fans.

REFERENCES


___. *Ten Little Indians*. 1939. Reprint. New York: Dodd, Mead and Co., 1940 (here entitled *And Then There Were None*).