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## **A detective in a world of illusions: Stereotypes and the narrative voice in *Murder is Easy* by Agatha Christie**

**Słowa kluczowe:** Agatha Christie, powieść detektywistyczna, stereotyp, tło przestrzenne

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We hear every day of murders committed in the country. Brutal and treacherous murders; slow protracted agonies from poisons administered by some kindred hand; sudden and violent deaths by cruel blows, inflicted with a stake cut from some spreading oak, whose very shadow promised — peace. In the county of which I write, I have been shown a meadow in which, on a quiet summer Sunday evening a young farmer murdered a girl who had loved and trusted him; and yet even now, with a stain of that foul deed upon it, the spect of this spot is — peace. No crime has ever been committed in the worst rookeries about Seven Dials that has not been also done in the face of that sweet rustic calm which still, in spite of all, we look on with a tender, half-mournful yearning and associate with — peace.<sup>1</sup>

This is how Mary Elisabeth Braddon's authorial narrator characterises the English countryside where unspeakable villainies are hidden behind the apparent serenity and kindness. While in the novels by Charles Dickens (also utilising sensational plots) crime was still the domain of forbidden city districts (like Seven Dials mentioned in the above quotation), in the texts of such writers as Joseph Sheridan Le Fanu, Wilkie Collins, or Mary Braddon it is also present in the country, even if it more often hides behind the façades of gentry manors than in the "sweet rustic calm" of idyllic landscapes. The "crooked counties", as Hugh Greene calls them, are also a common background of many a crime "committed" in the detective stories at the turn of the nineteenth century:

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<sup>1</sup> M.E. Braddon, *Lady Audley's Secret*, Ware 1997, p. 44.

So here we have sin in Yorkshire, Cheshire, Surrey, Sussex, Hampshire, Cornwall, Dorset and other less identifiable counties, though on internal evidence the home counties seem to be particularly well represented. It seems to me to be, in general, a more realistic countryside than that of the country house murders so prevalent in the detective stories written between the wars.<sup>2</sup>

This is not the place to argue about the presence or lack of realism in the texts mentioned by Greene — after all, every literary text models reality presented in it after certain rules. Yet it is true that in the texts of the interwar writers undertaking the theme of a country manor crime — for example Agatha Christie — the fact that the murder is committed in the country is often of no importance. It is the immediate context of the crime that is in the centre of interest (as well as the source of clues), no matter whether the crime itself was committed in a country house or in a flat in a city.

However, in quite a few novels by Agatha Christie the background of the crime is a space much more “open” in more than one sense of this word. Firstly, the openness refers to the scene of the crime itself — for example in *The Body in the Library* (1942), even if the corpse is found in the closed space of the eponymous room, the host of suspects is not limited to those present on the spot, while the investigation soon moves to other areas as well. Secondly, the village itself and its inhabitants are of interest as well so that the detective plot (like in many “non-provincial” stories by Christie) is enriched with novel-of-manners-like observations. Obviously, the riddle is still in the centre of interest so the background is not too extended: the number of characters is rather small (though not all of them are immediately involved in the crime) and so is the number of the landmarks, usually typical of an English village (an inn, a post office, a church, shops, sometimes a manor or a common). Moreover, the “openness” of the space setting finds its counterweight in its “closeness” in the sociological and not spatial sense: the villagers know each other, they are usually nosy, their lifestyle is regulated by daily routine and so is predictable,<sup>3</sup> while all departures from the commonplace are treated as sensation (including newcomers like Basil Blake in *The Body in the Library* or Mrs Lestrangle in *The Murder at the Vicarage* [1930]).

Usually provincial life is presented in Christie’s novels from the inner point of view. Sometimes the narrator is one of the villagers, like Reverend Clement in *The Murder is Announced* (1950) or Doctor Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926) — both are part of the community and perceive local habits and

<sup>2</sup> H. Greene, “Introduction”, [in:] *Further Rivals of Sherlock Holmes. The Crooked Counties*, ed. H. Greene, Harmondsworth 1976, p. 13.

<sup>3</sup> Such a routine underlies, for example, telephone calls in *The Body in the Library*: “Nine o’clock to nine thirty was the recognised time for the village to make friendly calls to neighbours. Plans for the day, invitations, and so on, were always issued then. The butcher had been known to ring up before nine if some crisis in the meat trade had occurred. At intervals during the day spasmodic calls might occur, though it was considered bad form to ring after nine-thirty at night” (A. Christie, *The Body in the Library*, Montreal 1942, pp. 5–6).

manners as something obvious. A similar perspective is adopted in such novels as *The Body in the Library* or *The Murder is Announced* where the narration is in the third person and the narrator passes from one leading character to another. The protagonists are “at home”, they belong to a provincial little world and live according to its rhythm.

What is interesting is that a murder is usually not perceived by the characters as a menace, a cataclysm intruding upon their safe and ordered world. It is simply an object of interest, something which constitutes a breach in the daily routine. In *The Murder at the Vicarage* the death of Colonel Protheroe provokes the vicar and his wife (who “looked frightened but excited”<sup>4</sup>) to engage in quite a common sense discussion concerning the time of the victim’s demise. A similar “investigation” is carried out (with rather disastrous results) by Misses Hinchcliffe and Murgatroyd in *The Murder is Announced*, while in *The Body in the Library* the discovery of a young girl’s body in the Bantrys’ manor results in “St. Mary Meade [...] having the most exciting morning it had known for a long time”,<sup>5</sup> the villagers indulging in speculation and gossip, the latter being a commonplace in the provincial world of Agatha Christie.<sup>6</sup> Thus murder is perceived as a sensation and not as something which does not happen in such a place.

However, the idea of the idyllic and innocent countryside, functioning as a (negatively verified) system of reference in Braddon’s novel (as well as, for example, in Conan Doyle’s “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches” [1892], where Holmes’ remarks are provoked by such an idealised image verbalised by Watson<sup>7</sup>) is sometimes referred to in those novels by Christie in which the events are presented from the outside perspective, that is from the point of view of a character who is not part of the village community and whose vision of provincial life is rooted in stereotypes rather than in their hitherto experience. Here the countryside is initially perceived as a place where life goes by without any disturbances and where — by definition — there is no place for serious crimes, especially such an atrocious crime as murder. Such an idea of the country is presented at the outset of *The Moving Finger* (1942) where the protagonist-narrator, city dweller Jerry Burton, comes to spend the time of his convalescence in the village of Lymstock, expecting that the only sources of excitement there would be “local politics”, “vil-

<sup>4</sup> A. Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Glasgow 1961, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> A. Christie, *The Body...*, p. 30.

<sup>6</sup> The ubiquitousness of gossip in the reality of Agatha Christie has been discussed by Adam Mazurkiewicz, who stresses its function as a means of social communication. Cf. A. Mazurkiewicz, “Hydra lernejska na angielskiej prowincji. Motyw plotki w twórczości Agathy Christie”, [in:] *Literatura kryminalna. Na tropie motywów*, ed. A. Gemra, Kraków 2016, pp. 151–170.

<sup>7</sup> “Who would associate crime with these dear old homesteads? / ‘They always fill me with a certain horror. It is my belief, Watson, founded upon my experience, that the lowest and vilest alleys in London do not present a more dreadful record of sin than does the smiling and beautiful countryside’ (A.C. Doyle, “The Adventure of the Copper Beeches”, [in:] idem, *The Original Illustrated “Strand” Sherlock Holmes. The Complete Facsimile Edition*, Ware 1996, p. 277).

lage gossip”, “local scandal” and “[s]mall beer”.<sup>8</sup> The murders in which Jerry will be involved in nearly makes the order of reality collapse, being not a sensation but a nightmare:

It seems odd now, to remember that Joanna and I were more amused by the [anonymous] letter than anything else. We hadn't then, the faintest inkling of what was to come — the trail of blood and violence and suspicion and fear.

One simply didn't associate that sort of thing with Lymstock.<sup>9</sup>

A similarly outside perspective is adopted in the novel which will be the subject of the present analysis — *Murder is Easy* (1939). Even if Luke Fitzwilliam is not the narrator here, he functions as the leading character in the whole text (with the exception of the penultimate chapter, where this role is ascribed to Bridget, the would-be victim of the serial killer). The object of the paper is to investigate the patterns that Luke imposes on the observed reality — patterns which are more complex than merely an erroneous vision of provincial life.

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Already the name of the village where most of the events occur — Wychwood — introduces the motif of witchcraft, thus indicating laws of reality not exactly in concord with the rational world vision typical of the detective fiction. It is true that the Golden Age<sup>10</sup> detective writers sometimes deployed gothic tale conventions, suggesting murder by magic, the most obvious example being the novels by John Dickson Carr: there are Satanist rites (*Below Suspicion* 1949), a curse that was once laid on some place (*Hag's Nook* 1933), mysterious psychic forces bringing death (*The Reader is Warned* 1939) or enlivened objects moving in dark rooms (*Poison in Jest* 1932).<sup>11</sup> Agatha Christie herself did not shun such a mixture of conventions — for example in *The Pale Horse* (1961), where death is allegedly sent by the means of witchcraft. However — leaving aside the texts

<sup>8</sup> A. Christie, *The Moving Finger*, New York 1942, p. 5.

<sup>9</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>10</sup> The term “Golden Age detective fiction” refers to the texts published during the inter-war period when, as Julian Symms puts it, “the detective story came to be regarded as a puzzle pure and complex” (J. Symons, *Bloody Murder. From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel. A History*, Harmondsworth 1985, p. 92). See also, for example, S. Knight, “The Golden Age”, [in:] *The Cambridge Companion to Crime Fiction*, ed. M. Priestman, Cambridge 2003, p. 77; S. Rowland, “The ‘classical’ model of the Golden Age”, [in:] *A Companion to Crime Fiction*, eds. Ch. Rzepka, L. Horsley, Chichester 2010, p. 117.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Cook notices some analogies between the locked room mystery (mastered by Carr) and ghost stories: “the murderer is able to move in and out of this space [i.e. the locked room] at will and undetected in the manner of a ghost in supernatural fiction” (idem, *Detective Fiction and the Ghost Story. The Haunted Text*, Basingstoke 2011, p. 110). It is hard to say whether the ghost story was indeed the source of inspiration for this type of detective plot, but the fact is that in Carr's novels the “impossible” crime is often accompanied by the atmosphere of terror.

where the gothic convention is dominant and the existence of the supernatural is never questioned (for instance William Hope Hodgson's Carnacki stories) — even in these stories the crime is committed and explained in a “traditional” way, while the laws governing the fictional reality eventually prove to be consistent with the mimetic world model; moreover the detective never takes into account any supernatural forces at play.

In *Murder is Easy*, as we have said, the name of the village suggests that it is a place where once witchcraft was practised. Indeed, it transpires that in the nearby Witches' Meadow black sabbaths used to be held — Jimmy, Luke's London friend, claims that “Wychwood-under-Ashe has got rather a reputation that way. One of the last places where they had a Witches' Sabbath — witches were still burned here in the last century — all sorts of tradition”.<sup>12</sup> But in Christie's novel (contrary to those by Carr) there is no suspicion that the subsequent murders might be in any way related to black magic still practised in the village. True, there is a surmise that the death of one of the victims may be related to the fact that he participated in midsummer rites held by a Mr Ellsworthy, the local antique shop owner in Witches' Meadow — but it is almost immediately abandoned, as it does not explain the other demises.<sup>13</sup> Witchcraft and black magic remain “outside” criminal intrigue, which does not mean that they are a mere curiosity, an aspect of the local colour inessential for the world vision communicated by the novel.

Wychwood's past supplies the protagonist with a perfect pretext to visit the village and carry out inquiries concerning what seems to be a series of deaths by natural causes or mere accidents (a fall from the window, drowning as a result of being drunk, taking poison by mistake, acute gastritis or septicaemia). He pretends to be a folklore scholar working on a book devoted to local superstitions still surviving in the country. At first the words of Mr Wake, the vicar — “The village communities are very backward”<sup>14</sup> — suggest that such studies might make sense in Wychwood. However, the further course of events shows that it is quite contrary, and Luke's investigation proves a double-folded fiction — it is not only a cover, but it also concerns a non-existent object. Already at the beginning of

<sup>12</sup> A. Christie, *Murder is Easy*, London 1956, p. 22.

<sup>13</sup> It is worth mentioning that the deaths are explained by Lord Whitfield by the intervention of supernatural forces, but it is an act of God that he means, drawing analogies to the biblical story of the children killed by bears as a punishment for mocking the prophet Elisha: “Elisha was a great and holy man. No one could be suffered to mock at him and live! I understand that because of my own case!” (ibidem, p. 146) — all the victims mocked Whitfield or offended him otherwise. However, these revelations eventually point to the lord as the chief suspect (evidently piously relieving God at accomplishing the revenge).

<sup>14</sup> Ibidem, p. 36. Such backwardness is suggested already in the initial scenes of the novel when Luke waiting on the platform sees “a train coming from Wychwood, It is a train consisting of one carriage pushed backwards by an antiquated little engine” (ibidem, p. 10); not only is the engine “antiquated”, but the train itself moves “backwards”. Of course in this context the word “backwards” refers to the kind of a motion, but it reverberates with the same word used by the vicar.

his stay in the village the protagonist tells his host a story of a doubtful authenticity concerning some “superstition that still lingers in out-of-the-way parts of the world”:<sup>15</sup>

Why, there is a village in Devonshire. The rector had to remove some granite menhirs that stood by the church because some people persisted in marching round them in some old ritual every time there was a death. Extraordinary how old heathen rites persist.<sup>16</sup>

Yet Lord Whitfield does not take up the topic, although as an advocate of progress he might have a lot to say about such heathen practices in Wychwood — had they really been taking place there. In the conversation with Mr Abbot, the lawyer, Luke simply makes up an allegedly common superstition in order to provoke his interlocutor into a conversation concerning Tommy Pierce’s death:

“There’s the child superstition, of course”, said Luke. “Death of a boy child — a violent death that is — the boy always walks. Not a girl child — interesting that”.

“Very”, said Mr. Abbot, “I never heard that before”.

Since Luke had just invented it, that was hardly surprising.<sup>17</sup>

Moreover, Luke is rather ignorant as to the essence of the rites once held in Witches’ Meadow or the superstitions present in other parts of England — as we have already mentioned, his remarks are mainly confabulations. In this way he imposes on reality a fictitious order and fictitious patterns that have no equivalent in facts. Magic and witchcraft thus are situated in the matters being merely the figment of imagination, opposed to solid historical reports concerning Wychwood’s past.

The motif of witchcraft is also related to a sense of unreality sometimes dominating in Luke’s perception — thus it is not merely a conscious confabulation concerning non-extant facts. This sensation is experienced by the protagonist mainly in his contacts with Bridget, his partner in the investigation. When he first meets her the young woman appears to him as a creature from another world, far from being commonplace:

Her black hair was blown up off her head by the sudden gust and Luke was reminded of a picture he had once seen — Nevinson’s “Witch”. The long pale delicate face, the black hair flying up to the stars. He could see this girl on a broom-stick flying up to the moon. [...]

He could see her now as she was — not in a sudden moment of fantasy. Tall, slender, a long delicate face with slightly hollow cheek-bones — ironic black brows — black eyes and hair. She was like a delicate etching, he thought — poignant and beautiful.<sup>18</sup>

Not only is Bridget not — as Luke initially imagines her — a buxom, fair-haired country girl “flushed and sunburnt — stroking a horse’s neck, stooping to weed a herbaceous border, sitting holding her hands to the blaze of a wood fire”,

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem, p. 31.

<sup>16</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>17</sup> Ibidem, p. 42.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

but the first contact with her places the man in “a sudden moment of fantasy”,<sup>19</sup> thus in a world of unreality: the protagonist views her in terms of fiction, as a figure in a painting and at the same time as a witch. True, the protagonist soon returns to reality, but the first impression will be referred to several times — when Luke would like to see her with a broom, a witch’s attribute (“You certainly are incomplete without a broomstick”<sup>20</sup>), or when he thinks about “that queer magic of hers”.<sup>21</sup> Even his infatuation is described in terms of magic — “Bewitched, that’s what I am, bewitched”<sup>22</sup> — as if it resulted from a spell cast on him. Such an image of Bridget matches the other fiction: the above-mentioned book devoted to folk beliefs and superstitions still allegedly surviving in the country. The woman becomes part of that unreal world which exists only in Luke’s confabulations.

That “strong sense of unreality”<sup>23</sup> returns in the scene when Luke observes Bridget and Ellsworthy walking along Ashe Ridge. Both of them seem to him “two figures out of a dream”,<sup>24</sup> just like Bridget herself when he meets her returning from Witches’ Meadow: “She looked as if she were returning from some far-off world, as though she had difficulty in adjusting herself to the world of now and here”.<sup>25</sup> This experience is juxtaposed with Luke’s encounters with other, “normal” villagers (that is fitting into his image), as the scene is preceded by Luke’s encounter with Rose Humbleby, an almost perfect realisation of a country girl stereotype.

The sun had come out while he was talking to Rose Humbleby. Now it had gone again. The sky was dull and menacing, and wind came in sudden erratic little puffs. It was as though he had stopped out of normal everyday life into that queer half world of enchantment, the consciousness of which had enveloped him ever since he came to Wychwood.<sup>26</sup>

Even the weather is conducive to depriving the observed world of its solidity. The shining sun, associated with the commonplace, flaxen-haired Rose, gives way to the suddenly darkening sky, as if foreshadowing the encounter with Bridget in a place where, “so tradition had it, [...] the witches had held revelry on Walpurgis Night and Hallowe’en”.<sup>27</sup> Bridget matches the place — but it is a fictitious Bridget, born of Luke’s imagination.

The same can be said about Ellsworthy — it is not incidental that Luke views both characters, Bridget and the antique shop owner, as if “out of a dream”. Ellsworthy at first seems to give life to the theses of Luke’s imaginary book, as togeth-

<sup>19</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>20</sup> Ibidem, p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

<sup>22</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>23</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>24</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>25</sup> Ibidem, p. 81.

<sup>26</sup> Ibidem, p. 80.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem, pp. 80–81.

er with a bunch of his decadent friends he tries to reactivate ancient rites that once were held in Witches' Meadow. However, as it finally expires, these seemingly dark deeds are merely an innocent amusement of some weirdos. Already the rather grotesque outlook of Ellsworthy's friends (as well as the light tone in which Bridget describes them) does not allow to treat them seriously:

Three extraordinary people have arrived at the Bells and Motley. Item one, a man with shorts, spectacles and a lovely plum-coloured silk shirt. Item two, a female with no eyebrows, dressed in a peplum, a pound of assorted sham Egyptian beads and sandals. Item three, a fat man in a lavender suit and co-respondent shoes.<sup>28</sup>

The phrase "sham Egyptia beads" functions here as a commentary upon the kind of witchcraft performed by the Bells and Motley company — it is "sham magic", too, that cannot be treated seriously. Even the blood on Ellsworthy's hands, when Luke and Bridget see him returning from the midsummer night escapade, is (at least according to Luke) that of a white cock and not a black one which is customarily associated with dark arts. Thus any connection of Ellsworthy and black magic is part of the same fiction as Luke's book and its subject matter. It is not real.

However, these sham necromantic motifs in terms of which reality is interpreted have their counterweight in the novel's reality. When Luke arrives at Wychwood, the image of a cosy, sunny village at some moment gives way to a more disquieting vision — the view of Ashe Ridge towering over the place: "He [Luke] became suddenly conscious of the overlying menace of Ashe Ridge".<sup>29</sup> The anxiety that the protagonist experiences proves to be less irrational than it might seem: the ridge appears to be towering over the place when once witches' sabbaths were held. The same view dispels for a moment the sense of unreality that Luke experiences later in the novel before witnessing Ellsworthy and Bridget walking along the ridge: "and at once the unreality passed. Ashe Ridge was real — it knew strange things — witchcraft and cruelty and forgotten blood lusts and evil rites...".<sup>30</sup> Thus the bogus sorcery finds its counterpart in actual vileness that once was present in Wychwood when the real evil was worshipped there: fiction is juxtaposed with reality.

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The world of witchcraft and sorcery is not the only system of reference functioning as a potential interpretative model for the novel's reality. The protagonist refers on various occasions to literary or cultural stereotypes, applying them to his surroundings.

<sup>28</sup> Ibidem, pp. 133–134.

<sup>29</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>30</sup> Ibidem, p. 74.

The most obvious frame of reference is the convention of detective fiction — after all the pivot of the plot in *Murder is Easy* is a criminal puzzle. Moreover, at the time when the novel was written this type of literature was a highly conventionalised genre with the rules formulated in several critical texts.<sup>31</sup> This formulaic nature of a Golden Age detective story often resulted in autothematic commentaries uttered either by the narrator or the characters and concerning the relation between “literary” reality and that which is presented in a given text. Actually, such commentaries appeared already at the dawn of detective fiction. In Fergus Hume’s *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab* (1886) the case is said to have “been taken bodily out of Gaboreau’s [sic] novels, and that his famous detective Lecocq only would be able to unravel it”.<sup>32</sup> Other writers tend to be less favourable as far as the works of their predecessors are concerned: in Conan Doyle’s *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) Sherlock Holmes criticises fictitious detectives created by Poe and Gaboriau, confronting their methods with the science of deduction that he professes, while Joseph Rouletabille in Gaston Leroux’ *Le Mystere de la chambre jaune* (1907) mocks the procedures applied by the “agents littéraires... qui bâtissez des montaignes de stupidité avec un pas sur le sable, avec le dessin d’un main sur un mur!”,<sup>33</sup> of course in opposition to the protagonist’s ways. In later texts literary fiction functions sometimes as a system of reference in terms of which a given crime is described, as in the case of Rossiter, one of the characters of Edmund Crispin’s *The Moving Toyshop* (1946) to whom “[i]t all looked so difficult — so implausible. Almost a locked-room mystery; certainly an ‘impossible murder’,<sup>34</sup> or Inspector Dodd in *Death at the President’s Lodgings* (1936) by Michael Innes, who complains:

Dr Umpleby was shot dead at eleven o’clock last night. That’s the first of several things that make the death something like the story-books. You know the murdered squire’s house in the middle of the snow-storm? And the fancy changes that run on that — liners on the ocean, submarines, balloons in the air, locked rooms with never a chimney?<sup>35</sup>

Thus the circumstances of both Miss Tardy’s and Doctor Umpleby’s murders are recognised already at the level of the fictional world as analogous to those

<sup>31</sup> The rules were proposed already in 1913 by Carolyn Wells (*The Technique of Mystery Story*, Springfield, MA 1913), and later in the essays by R. Austin Freeman (“The art of the detective story” [1924], [in:] *The Art of a Mystery Story. A Collection of Critical Essays* (1928), ed. H. Haycraft, New York 1947, pp. 7–17), as well as S.S. Van Dine and Ronald Knox (respectively: S.S. Van Dine, “Twenty rules for writing detective stories” [1928], [in:] *The Art of a Mystery Story...*, pp. 189–193; R.A. Knox, “Detective story decalogue” [1929], [in:] *The Art of a Mystery Story...*, pp. 194–196). It has to be admitted that the writers did not always respect these guidelines or followed them — like Agatha Christie herself — in a rather perverse way.

<sup>32</sup> F. Hume, *The Mystery of a Hansom Cab*, Chicago-New York 1889, p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> G. Leroux, *Le Mystere de la chambre jaune*, Paris 1960, p. 268.

<sup>34</sup> E. Crispin. *The Moving Toyshop*, Harmondsworth 1958, p. 118.

<sup>35</sup> M. Innes, “Death at the president’s lodgings”, [in:] *The Michael Innes Omnibus*, Harmondsworth 1983, p. 17.

which are typical of detective fiction — the crime seems so improbable because it appears too “literary”. On the contrary, in *The Hollow Man* (a.k.a. *The Three Coffins* 1935) by John Dickson Carr Chapter 17 consists of an extended lecture of Doctor Fell concerning the locked room murder (with references to such canonical authors as Israel Zangwill, Ellery Queen or S.S. Van Dine) where the literary solutions function as an interpretative code for the “real” murder (that is committed in Doctor Fell’s world).<sup>36</sup>

Also the protagonist of *Murder is Easy* refers to the patterns of literary reality. When he eventually discards the mask of a folklore scholar and reveals his true identity, he introduces himself as “that well-known character in fiction, the private investigator”.<sup>37</sup> Let us notice that this “bookish” interpretation of Luke’s role is not very precise — he is not a professional private detective commissioned with an investigation — but it is in concord with contemporary detective fiction conventions. The same conventions are alluded to when Luke writes down his hitherto observations and suspicions, ordering them in a way typical of literary detectives (a list of suspects, motives, opportunities etc.). At the same time, he rejects the most obvious solutions thus contraposing reality and fiction:

Mr. Abbot: Possible case against him.

(Feel a lawyer is definitely a suspicious person. Possibly prejudice.) His personality, florid, genial, etc., would be definitely suspicious in a book — always suspect bluff genial men. Objection: this is not a book, but real life.<sup>38</sup>

Similar objections appear in connection with another item on the list:

Mr Wake: Possible case against him.

Very unlikely. Possible religious mania? A mission to kill? Sainly old clergymen likely starters in books, but (as before) this is real life.<sup>39</sup>

Thus the solutions typical of literary fiction — though referred to — are not taken into account (contrary to Doctor Fell’s divagations in *The Hollow Man*). Other analogies to literary patterns (not necessarily those of a detective story) in Christie’s novels are verified in a similar way. Already at the beginning of the

<sup>36</sup> The solutions proposed by the “secondary fiction” (that is what is recognised as literary fiction in the world of the novel) adopted by the character-detective function at the implied communicative level as a signal of open fictitiousness of the presented universe — we have to do with a puzzle to solve (like a mathematical problem). In a similar way Doctor Fell’s lecture is interpreted by Susan Sweeney, defining it as “‘a mise en abyme’ which reveals the fictionality of the novel in which it appears” (eadem, “Locked rooms: Detective fiction, narrative theory and self-reflexivity”, [in:] *The Charming Craft. Original Essays on Detective Fiction and Contemporary Literary Theory*, eds. R.G. Walker, J.M. Frazer, Macomb 1990, p. 2). Indeed, when one of the characters questions the validity of the analogies, Doctor Fell retorts: “we’re in a detective story, and we don’t fool the reader we’re not” (J.D. Carr, *The three coffins*, [in:] *The John Dickson Carr Treasury*, New York 1964, p. 135).

<sup>37</sup> A. Christie, *Murder is Easy...*, p. 104.

<sup>38</sup> Ibidem, p. 61.

<sup>39</sup> Ibidem, p. 62.

novel Luke is called to order by Bridget to whom he ascribes a sentimental attachment to her family home, now possessed by Lord Whitfield:

“I hate to destroy the dramatic picture you are building up”, she murmured. “But actually I left here when I was two and a half, so you see the old home motive doesn’t apply. I can’t even remember this place”.

“You are right”, said Luke. “Forgive the lapse into film language”.<sup>40</sup>

When Luke walks towards Witches’ Meadow, he fears for a moment that he might find Bridget’s body there. The irrationality of this anxiety is stressed by his reflection: “It would be in a play or a book”,<sup>41</sup> thus the protagonist’s fears are not grounded in his experience of reality, but in literary stereotypes. Another stereotype is referred to — half seriously — by Bridget herself, when she claims: “Heroines are never killed”<sup>42</sup> (to which Luke reacts with: “But you are not [a heroine]”,<sup>43</sup> again confronting literary conventions and the unpredictable reality).

Another stereotype — more cultural than literary — that is referred to in the novel is the idea of the English countryside and its inhabitants. Already the first description of Wychwood, seen through the protagonist’s eyes, shows it as a typical village with characteristic landmarks:

Wychwood [...] consists mainly of its one principal street. There were shops, small Georgian houses, prim and aristocratic, with whitened steps and polished knockers, there were picturesque cottages with flower gardens. There was an inn, the Bells and Motley, standing a little back from the street. There was a village green and a duck pond, and presiding over them a dignified Georgian house which Luke thought at first must be his destination, Ashe Manor.<sup>44</sup>

The image of peaceful provinces, analogous to that which is cherished by Jerry Burton in *The Moving Finger*, is alluded to already at Luke’s encounter with Miss Pinkerton on the train to London. When she informs Luke of a series of murders in Wychwood, Luke does not give credence to these revelations. His incredulity does not concern the fact that such crimes might occur at all (it is not incidental that Christie made him a retired policeman), but that they might occur in a place like Wychwood. Crime is not something that is associated with provincial life — in Luke’s reflections on Miss Pinkerton’s sensations (who is a (“[r]ather an old dear”, although “a little bit batty”) appears the motif of boredom dominating in the life of country communities:

I wonder why they got those fancies? Deadly dull lives, I suppose — an unacknowledged craving for drama. Some old ladies, so I’ve heard, fancy everyone is poisoning their food.<sup>45</sup>

<sup>40</sup> Ibidem, p. 35.

<sup>41</sup> Ibidem, p. 81.

<sup>42</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>43</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>44</sup> Ibidem, p. 23.

<sup>45</sup> Ibidem, pp. 13–14. It is perhaps worth mentioning that in the world of Agatha Christie elderly ladies fancying that someone “is poisoning their food” are often right.

The villagers do not depart much from the more or less stereotypical ideas which are verbalised in *The Moving Finger*, where the protagonist-narrator concludes with satisfaction:

Everybody in Lymstock had a label [...]. There was Mr. Symmington the lawyer, thin and dry, with his querulous bridge-playing wife. Dr Griffith — the dark, melancholy doctor — and his sister who was big and hearty. The vicar, a scholarly absent-minded elderly man and his erratic eager-faced wife. Mr. Pyne of Prior's End, and finally Miss Emily Barton herself, the perfect spinster of village tradition.<sup>46</sup>

Wychwood seems to be a similar place. Even if some characters depart slightly from the acknowledged image, the overall idea of an English village community is not disturbed. Miss Pinkerton, too, is perceived as a typical English “old lady”, as Luke defines her under the first impression made on him by his fellow-traveller — thus kind-hearted, nice and predictable:

there was something very cosy and English about old ladies like this old lady [...]. There was nothing at all like them in the Mayang Straits. They could be classed with plum pudding on Christmas Day and village cricket and open fireplaces with wood fires. The sort of things you appreciated a good deal when you hadn't got them and were on the other side of the world.<sup>47</sup>

However, it should be remembered that Luke, through whose eyes the village and its inhabitants are shown, is a stranger — a double one, too, as he not only is a city man but also spent whole years far from England in the colonies. The signals that the idea of the sunny and quiet provinces inhabited by charming and dear old ladies is not altogether in concord with reality appear already at the beginning of the novel when Luke's first impression of the home country is presented:

England! England on a June day, with a grey sky and a sharp biting wind. Nothing welcoming about her on a day like this! And the people! Crowds of them, all with grey faces like the sky — anxious worried faces. The houses, too, springing up everywhere like mushrooms. Nasty little houses! Revolting little houses! Chicken coops in the grandiose manner all over the countryside!<sup>48</sup>

The idea of a kind-hearted spinster or a quiet village where there is no place for serious crime thus appears to be rather the product of imagination not grounded in experience. This suggestion is corroborated by Luke's reaction to Bridget's appearance — her witch-like looks do not match his expectations based on a stereotype acquired abroad:

He had an acknowledged picture at the back of his mind during his voyage home to England — a picture of an English girl flushed and sunburnt — stroking a horse's neck, stooping

<sup>46</sup> A. Christie, *The Moving Finger*..., p. 6.

<sup>47</sup> A. Christie, *Murder is Easy*..., p. 12. This idealised vision of reality is completed with the narrator's parenthetic remark commenting on the stereotype: “They were also the sort of things you got very bored with when you had a good deal of them, but as has been already told, Luke had only landed in England three or four hours ago” (ibidem, p. 12).

<sup>48</sup> Ibidem, p. 7.

to weed a herbaceous border, sitting holding put her hands to the blaze of a wood fire. It had been a warm gracious vision.<sup>49</sup>

A similar signal that the world does not have to be the realisation of stereotypical ideas is the figure of the lawyer, Mr Abbot. The fact that he is not a dry, ascetic old man, but a jovial and stout middle-aged fellow is of no importance for the further course of events, but it functions as a signal that the assumed models and their equivalents in reality do not have to be consistent with each other. Pastor Wake, too, eventually appears not to be an absent-minded scholar submerged in biblical texts, Doctor Thomas — a boyish and naive young man, and Miss Pinkerton — a batty old lady (Rose defines her as a “fay” with the sixth sense, which suggests some acumen). The first impression often proves to be wrong.

However, one of the characters seems to be a complete realisation of a stereotype — and she is perceived as one by Luke. It is Miss Waynflete:

She was, Luke thought, completely the country spinster. Her thin form was neatly dressed in a tweed coat and skirt and she wore a grey silk blouse with a cairngorm brooch. Her hat, a conscientious felt, sat squarely upon her well-shaped head. Her face was pleasant and her eyes, through their pince-nez, decidedly intelligent.<sup>50</sup>

Let us notice that the interior of Miss Waynflete’s cottage seems to be a perfect externalisation of her nature.<sup>51</sup> Her parlour is an ideal spatial context for a stereotypical spinster — with its lavender perfume, numerous nick-nacks, photographs of nephews and nieces (as if a recompense for no children of her own) and old-fashioned furniture.

Eventually, however, the equivalence is not established between Miss Waynflete and her parlour, but between her and the whole village “[s]o smiling and peaceful — so innocent — and all the time this crazy streak of murder running through it”,<sup>52</sup> as Luke puts it. As the confabulations concerning witchcraft are juxtaposed with the actual vile deeds committed by the witches, so the stereotypical vision of reality proves to be a façade behind which real evil, impersonated by Miss Waynflete, is hidden.<sup>53</sup> As Mrs Humbleby, the wife of one of the victims, would say: “So much wickedness — that is the thought that is always with me

<sup>49</sup> Ibidem, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Ibidem, pp. 43–44.

<sup>51</sup> A similar relation between a character and the place he is ascribed to links Lord Wakefield and Ashe Manor in its present state: the architectural nightmare into which he turned an elegant Queen Anne manor reveals what its owner is — a nouveau riche, with no education or refinement, but with great ego. Incidentally he will appear at the end of the novel a perfect “candidate” for the village murderer.

<sup>52</sup> A. Christie, *Murder is Easy...*, p. 74.

<sup>53</sup> Let us notice that taking Miss Waynflete for granted results in Luke’s misinterpretation of Lord Wakefield’s explanations concerning breaking off his engagement with her: “Blinking bird she had — one of those beastly twittering canaries — always hated them — bad business — wrung its neck” (ibidem, p. 132). As the sentences lack the subject it is not clear who killed the bird, but Luke has no doubts that it was the lord and not Miss Waynflete (as his conversation with the latter shows).

— wickedness here in Wychwood. And that woman is at the bottom of it all”.<sup>54</sup> This utterance will find its echo at the end of the novel when Luke’s words — “I don’t like the way Ashe Ridge broods over the village”<sup>55</sup> — suggest another equivalence: between Miss Waynflete and the witches wedded to the devil and impersonating the evil from the past practised there.

\* \* \*

Eventually it appears that *Murder is Easy* observes the “rules” of a detective story: the murderer appears to be “the least likely person”<sup>56</sup> and, what is more, the confidante of the two detectives. However, contrary to the genre formula, the solution of the puzzle does not bring back order — at least from the protagonist’s perspective.<sup>57</sup> His words about Ashe Ridge, the “witness” of the past and present vileness, which still “broods over the village” suggest that the evil has not been altogether eliminated, while the references to the witchcraft past of the village prompt its timelessness. Thus the novel departs from the conventions of the earlier variants of the genre where crime was merely an intellectual problem. This departure — being more and more manifest in the detective fiction of the inter-war period — is thematized in *Murder is Easy* due to references to literary and cultural stereotypes already at the level of the fictional world which result in a tension between the rules of a (formularised) genre and individual patterns of a given literary text which escape the formula.

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<sup>54</sup> Ibidem, p. 181.

<sup>55</sup> Ibidem, p. 189.

<sup>56</sup> Ibidem, p. 86.

<sup>57</sup> Similar suggestions are carried by the fact that it is the murderess herself that narrates her crimes, gloating over them. Robin Woods points out that in the classical detective story the explanations are usually provided by the detective and not by the culprit, the former as if asserting his control over the latter: “When the time comes for confessions in these stories, it is spoken not by the villain, but by the detective, who will himself — or herself — tell the story of the crime and leave the criminal only to confirm it or deny it. Thus the dangerous voice is silenced, and the dangerous criminal icon is covered by the figure of the detective” (R. Woods, “‘It was the mark of Cain’. Agatha Christie and the murder of mystery”, [in:] *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, eds. J.H. Delamater, R. Prigozi, Westport, CT-London 1997, p. 104). In *Murder is Easy* it is the criminal’s voice that dominates over that of the detective.

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## A detective in a world of illusions: Stereotypes and the narrative voice in *Murder is Easy* by Agatha Christie

### Summary

Already the sensational novel writers of the second half of the nineteenth century renounced the stereotypical image of peaceful and idyllic provincial life, dominating in English culture at the time. This stereotype is recalled in a number of Agatha Christie's novels, where the seemingly quiet countryside occurs to be a scene of the crime. The object of analysis in the paper is *Murder is Easy* (1938), one of Christie's novels where the action is set in the country. The narration here is carried almost exclusively from the protagonist's point of view, who imposes various stereotypes — literary and cultural — on the observed reality (among others that of the peaceful countryside, but also its more sinister counterpart — that of country witches). The stereotypes and the clash with reality result in a more complex vision of the world than that which is proposed in classical detective fiction where the crime is merely an intellectual problem.