

Agatha Christie's Women

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Agatha Christie's characters are stereotypes and caricatures, but they are not just that. They possess not simply two dimensions but two and a half. The little bit of fun gently poked at the "typical" figure, the slightly surprising or contradictory quality, the merest touch of real humanity—all make Christie's types just a bit more than cardboard puppets dancing to the choreography of the plot. In her characterization as in her puzzles, Christie found the perfect balance, the hallmark of the really skilled popular writer, between convention and invention. She gave her readers exactly what they anticipated, yet added just enough that was intriguingly new to keep them stimulated and absorbed.¹ Her characters are recognizable and familiar individuals through whom escape and adventure can be enjoyable without being frightening.

There are a remarkable number of strong female characters in Christie's books, and only a very few of them are depicted negatively. Efficient, practical, and competent businesswomen, housekeepers and secretaries; successful and professional artists, actresses and authors; commanding, cultured, and intellectual headmistresses; the shrewd and courageous Miss Marple, on the surface a fluttery, dithering old maid but underneath ruthless in the cause of justice—these women, however briefly they pass through the stories, are essentially admirable types. In addition, Christie presented over the years a series of amateur heroines of "high spirits, daring, and imperturbability,"² from Prudence "Tuppence" Beresford, first introduced in *The Secret Adversary* in 1922 through Lady Eileen "Bundle" Brent of *The Secret at Chimneys* (1925) and *The Seven Dials Mystery* (1929) and Lady Frances "Frankie" Derwent of *The Boomerang Clue* (1933) to Victoria Jones in *They Came to Baghdad* (1951), Hilary Craven in *Destination Unknown* (1954) and Katherine "Ginger" Corrigan in *The Pale Horse* (1961)—and quite a number of others. These young women all possessed similar attributes. Most importantly, they were thoroughly "modern." They were "plucky," "energetic," "impish," "boyish," "gamin," "spunky," "good sports," "spirited fillies," "alive," "courageous," "alert," "rakish," "minxes," "pert and saucy," "impudent," "gallant," "fighters," and "brimming over with life." They were typical 1920's flappers (right through to the books of the 1960's): they smoked, drank, and swore, and were regarded by their elders with a combination of outrage and envy. They were athletic enough to swing up and down the ivy when essential to the plot, skilled and audacious enough to drive bright little sports cars in a fashion which terrified everyone else on the road, brave enough to take more than their fair share of risks—and always they were admired for these qualities. In *N or M?* Tuppence Beresford, by now a middle-aged woman with a grown family, fakes a telephone call, hides in a cupboard, and beats her husband Tommy to the scene of a spy investigation in which she then plays a major role. Tommy's reaction to his wife's initiative and trickery is secret admiration, and his boss in British intelligence agrees: "She's a smart woman."³ When Ginger Corrigan in *The*

¹John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance: Formula Stories as Art and Popular Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), pp. 11-12.

²Nancy Blue Wynne, *An Agatha Christie Chronology* (New York: Ace Books, 1976), p. 33.

³Agatha Christie, *N or M?* (1941; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing, 1971), p. 43.

Pale Horse insists on taking a grave personal risk to trap members of a murder-for-hire operation, the handsome and very eligible Mark Easterbrook promptly falls in love with “her red hair, her freckles, her gallant spirit.”⁴ But the theme is perhaps best developed in *The Boomerang Clue* (British title: *Why Didn't They Ask Evans?*), in which Christie contrasted Lady Frances “Frankie” Derwent, an impish and very independent young woman with Moira Nicholson, gentle, “like a sad Madonna” and “terribly delicate.”⁵ Bobby Jones, the rather bumbling but eminently nice young hero finds both women attractive, but for a while it looks like Moira is going to win him, because she brings out all his protective male instincts. “Bobby likes them helpless,” complains the unhappy Frankie, “It’s extraordinary how men like helpless women.” Another character, Roger Bassington-french, tries to comfort Frankie: “The truth of the matter is that you’ve got guts and she hasn’t.” Of course Bobby eventually sees the light, and in the denouement admits to Frankie that while Moira’s “face” had attracted him momentarily, Frankie had captured his heart because she was “so plucky about things,” “so frightfully plucky.” Just to provide the typical Christie double-twist, however, Moira’s “weak and helpless” personality turns out to be a front; she is in fact a gang member and dope dealer, and has “the nerve to put any number of people out of the way without turning a hair!”⁶ Thus we are left with not one but two strong female characters, one good and one evil. And Frankie gets her man—as do Tuppence, Bundle, Ginger, and all the others of the type.

Here the complications begin. These peppy, modern young women are part of the romantic subplots of the novels in which they appear, and they are paired off at the end, married, and presumably live happily ever after. Frequently, and with conviction, Christie’s characters speak of marriage as the goal and destiny of all womankind. Many of her female characters are employed, but whenever they have the chance, they throw up excellent jobs and careers for the sake of a man and a home. If they work after marriage, it is almost invariably because their husbands are invalids, wastrels, or deceased. Most explicitly described is the fate of Rosamund Darnley in *Evil Under the Sun*. Hercule Poirot admires Rosamund very much from the moment he meets her, for she has brains, charm and *chic*. She is sensible, alert, and proud, and a very successful designer and businesswoman. Early in the book she has a rather ambiguous conversation with Poirot about her goals in life, but by the final paragraphs all doubt is dispelled. Kenneth Marshall, an old friend, proposes to her:

“You’re going to be the persecuted female, Rosamund. You’re going to give up that damned dressmaking business of yours and we’re going to live in the country.”

“Don’t you know that I make a very handsome income out of my business? Don’t you realize that it’s *My* business—that I created it and worked it up and that I’m proud of it! And you’ve got the damned nerve to come along and say, ‘Give it all up, dear.’”

“I’ve got the damned nerve to say it, yes.”

“And you think I care enough for you to do it?”

“If you don’t,” said Kenneth Marshall, “you’d be no good to me.”

⁴Agatha Christie, *The Pale Horse* (1961; rpt. London: Wm. Collins, 1964), p. 113.

⁵Agatha Christie, *The Boomerang Clue* (1933; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing, 1971), p. 91.

⁶*The Boomerang Clue*, pp. 149, 138, 223, 219.

Rosamund said softly; "Oh, my dear, I've wanted to live in the country with you all my life. Now—it's going to come true."⁷

There can be little doubt, however, that after her marriage Rosamund remained sensible and successful—in her new job. For Tuppence Beresford, too, marriage was not "a haven, or a refuge, or a crowning glory, or a state of bondage," it was "a sport," and the glimpses we have of Tuppence as a married woman confirm that her marriage *was* like that.⁸ Christie presented marriages of partnership and companionship—"Joint Ventures"—in a positive light; the ones she showed more unfavorably were those in which either partner was weak or cowed by the other, although even in those cases she made it clear that she understood the human needs which led men and women into such relationships.⁹

Often Christie illuminated character types by having them profess views on women which were typical of their class, age, and status: "Women tell a lot of lies." "All women fancy marriage, no matter how advanced and self-supporting they are," "Poison is a woman's weapon," "Women are ruthless," "If you want a thing broadcast, tell a woman," "Old maids are notoriously inquisitive," and so on. That Christie used such generalizations so frequently to delineate character reveals how pervasive and generally accepted some of them were, but one must resist the temptation to conclude that Christie herself necessarily agreed with them. Such statements were simply instantly and broadly recognizable clues which helped her readers to categorize the characters.

By other means, however, Christie did reveal that she herself had the somewhat "traditional" attitude to sex roles which was typical of *her* class and status. In her books, women's main mental capability seems to be intuitive; even Miss Marple, who is praised by her distinguished male admirers like Sir Henry Clithering for her wonderfully (and surprisingly) logical brain, is so discursive in speech that it seems unbelievable that she can think straight. On at least one occasion, the aging, fluffy-haired spinster explicitly denies solving a mystery by logical deduction but instead very femininely credits "feeling," "a kind of emotional reaction or susceptibility to—well, . . . atmosphere."¹⁰ The spunky young heroines like Tuppence and Frankie, brave though they may be, are not really intelligent or sensible; they are over-inquisitive, headstrong, foolhardy, and thus are perpetually having to be rescued from some scrape or other. In several of her books, moreover, Christie implied that maternal love was one of the strongest possible motives for murder; if five characters all had motive and opportunity, but one is suspected of committing the crime for the sake of "her children," you can be fairly certain that she is the guilty party. As Poirot himself put it, "Mothers . . . are particularly ruthless when their children are in danger."¹¹ Poirot, too, although usually fairly cynical about women, does have a soft spot for

⁷Agatha Christie, *Evil Under the Sun* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1941), pp. 259-60.

⁸Agatha Christie, *The Secret Adversary* (1922; rpt. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1967), p. 215.

⁹In the largely autobiographical romantic novel *Unfinished Portrait* which Christie published under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott, she partially attributes the failure of Celia's—her own—marriage to the fact that she clung to her husband too much. "Celia had very little of the devil in her, and a woman with very little devil in her has a poor chance with men. . . . There's a brute in man that likes being stood up to" Mary Westmacott (pseud.), *Unfinished Portrait* (1934; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing, 1971), p. 275.

¹⁰Agatha Christie, *Nemesis* (1971; rpt. London: Wm. Collins, 1972), p. 180.

¹¹Agatha Christie, *Death on the Nile* (1937; rpt. London: Penguin Books, 1955), p. 68. Among Christie novels in which the instincts of motherhood play an important role in the plot are *Dead Man's Folly* (1956), *Ordeal by Innocence* (1958), *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1962) and *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* (1968). Note that all of these are from late in her career.

them when they are mothers—"Bonne mère, très femme."¹² Although Christie biographer Derrick Murdoch goes much too far when he writes that Christie had "little feeling for sexual equality" and is quite wrong in insisting that "strong-willed wives receive unsympathetic treatment in all her books,"¹³ there are certainly enough traces of such attitudes permeating Christie's works to explain how he has read them that way.

Christie thus presented seemingly contradictory images of women—the independent, self-sufficient, capable and courageous woman who is respected for those qualities and treated as an equal partner in adventure and in life coexisted with the silly, emotional woman who has no identity except through her husband and children. But the lines kept crossing; the independent young flapper heroines wanted to settle down to marriage and children, and the silly ditherers often turned out to be made of steel.

Christie herself lived a life of such ambivalences. Brought up to be a proper upper middle-class wife and mother, the natural pattern of her life was broken by service as a VAD nurse and dispenser during World War I, by the "accident" of her becoming a best-selling author, and by the failure of her first marriage. Whatever she might say about deferring to her husband, and no matter how she insisted that her occupation in life was not as author but as "Married Woman," she was in fact a professional, a considerable personality in her own right, and possessed of much independence of mind, not to mention income.¹⁴

Christie reached maturity and began writing at a time when the image of women in England and North America had been tumbled from its Victorian pedestal, but had not been remodelled. The period between 1900 and the end of the 1920's was one of rapid transition in both the image and the role of women; it was in this period that Christie herself was formed, and her books describe that transition, directly and indirectly, at some length. While many of the traditional qualities of maternal love, gentleness, patience, and docility were still given lip-service, at the same time the needs of modern technological society (especially in wartime) demanded a different kind of woman—a capable, efficient, self-confident sort, who could perform a job as typist or nurse skillfully before marriage, and then settle down to being equally competent, self-sufficient, indeed "businesslike," as housewife and mother in an increasingly complex and demanding world. The popular literature of Christie's day glorified that contradictory and ambiguous mixture of qualities, and so did she, right through to her last books more than fifty years later.

Agatha Christie is credited with being the first major author to add the touches which opened up the classical mystery to a wide female readership.¹⁵ Her romantic subplots, thin as they were, helped that to occur. So did her quite deliberate attempt, especially in her early books, to provide vicarious adventure for the house-

¹²Agatha Christie, "The Adventure of 'The Western Star'" in *Poirot Investigates* (1925; rpt. New York: Dodd, Mead, 1961), p. 21.

¹³Derrick Murdoch, *The Agatha Christie Mystery* (Toronto: Pagurian Press, 1976), p. 48. Murdoch's example is Christie's failure to comment on the browbeaten lives of Arab women in her memoir of life on an archeological dig. In fact, however, Christie makes a very definite if indirect comment by contrasting the Arab women with the bright, gay, raucous and even ribald Kurdish women whom she clearly enjoyed very much—even if they did bully their husbands. See Agatha Christie Mallowan, *Come, Tell Me How You Live* (New York: Dodd, Mead, 1946), pp. 86, 168, 225.

¹⁴Murdoch, p. 49; Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1977), pp. 128, 131-32, 430.

¹⁵Murdoch, p. 127.

and duty-bound. But finally, it seems, her books appealed and continue to appeal to female readers because she possessed such an "accurate social eye";¹⁶ because she succeeded so well in capturing the nuances and ambiguities of life in the twentieth century. Few of Christie's readers have had direct contact with the genteel upper middle-class life of the English village or country manor she so frequently described, nor, presumably, with murder. Like Miss Marple, however, they recognize typical people and behavior patterns, and thus can identify with them. Agatha Christie always liked to claim that she was a lowbrow; what she really meant was that she did not write down to her audience. She gave them back their own ambivalent image of what a woman is and does, because she shared it.

As Colin Watson, John Cawelti and others have pointed out, the enormous appeal of the classical mystery of the Golden Age of the 1920's and 1930's seemed to lie in its success in providing reassurance for its middle-class readers—reassurance that crime is an individual matter, not a social one, that it is logical and soluble, that it is neat and relatively painless, explicable, and not a matter for collective guilt.¹⁷ But Christie's books also reassured simply by the reiteration of familiar patterns and types. She did not delve very deeply into the souls of her characters, but in examining large numbers of them, and from various angles, she revealed just a few of the contradictions and complexities of real life.¹⁸ To generalize about sexual roles is to lose that touch of reality, and Christie never did that. Certain patterns emerge in her portrayal of women, but no simple typing or role-playing. Possibly one occasion when Christie *did* express her own opinion through the words of one of her characters was when she had Sarah King, a young doctor in *Appointment with Death*, remark: "I do hate this differentiation between the sexes. 'The modern girl has a thoroughly businesslike attitude to life!' That sort of thing. It's not a bit true! Some girls are businesslike and some aren't. Some men are sentimental and muddle-headed, others are clear-headed and logical. These are just different types of brains. Sex only matters when sex is directly concerned."¹⁹ Despite the fact that she wrote in a form which demanded stereotypes and caricatures, Christie was not a generalizer. She knew more of life than that. That is why her books give a surprisingly accurate picture of the life of twentieth-century women.

¹⁶Emma Lathen, "Cornwallis's Revenge," in H.R.F. Keating, ed., *Agatha Christie: First Lady of Crime* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977), p. 86.

¹⁷See Colin Watson, *Snobbery with Violence* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1971), p. 167ff.; John G. Cawelti, *Adventure, Mystery and Romance*, p. 99; H.R.F. Keating, "Introduction," in H.R.F. Keating, ed., *Agatha Christie*, p. 8; W. O. Aydelotte, "The Detective Story as a Historical Source," *Yale Review*, 39 (1949-50), rpt. in *The Mystery Writer's Art*, F. M. Nevins, ed., (Bowling Green: Popular Press, 1970), p. 308ff.

¹⁸See Edmund Crispin, "The Mistress of Simplicity," and Colin Watson, "The Message of Mayhem Parva," in H.R.F. Keating, ed., *Agatha Christie*, pp. 39-48 and 95-110.

¹⁹Agatha Christie, *Appointment with Death* (1937; rpt. New York: Dell Publishing, 1971), p. 64.