

Feminism in crime
fictions – agatha
christie as a feminist
writer



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From the late nineteenth century, different movements started to work all around the world, protesting for the equality of women in the political and social life. The thesis of the feminism covered every aspect of life within a short period of time, so it had a great influence on literature as well. The feminist theories penetrated most of the genres and sub-genres; consequently, they also affected the genre of crime fiction which had been living its 'golden age' in the same time as the first wave of feminism occurred.

Creating strong and positive leading female characters have always been a difficult task for writers, but because of the special needs of a crime story, it is especially demanding in a case of this genre. The majority of the detectives have always been men, and women have usually been the victims or the implementer of the felony, but they have - even in stories written by women - rarely been the main investigator of a crime. This fact has many reasons to be confirmed.

There are several reasons, why a woman cannot be a detective, but the most obvious one is that if a woman represents all of the feminine ideals, she can only play the role of a victim, a woman; on the other hand, who does not live up to these ideals can only be the villainess in the story. However, with the appearance of the feminism, new types of characters turned up, trying to empower the main woman roles. The first step in the 1930s was to allow them to partly participate in the investigations, as girlfriends, fiancées or wives of the detectives.

Another way to include women characters in the main plot of a crime story was to put them into a situation in which she has to solve a crime because she has to save somebody who is important for her or in some cases she gets in even bigger trouble if she cannot solve the mystery. This was an advantageous strategy, but it has a significant detriment, namely the heroine of these kinds of stories cannot have easily been made into a series character because these fictions were mainly grounded on the female character's commitment in a special case and its solving process.

After these tries for creating the perfect woman detective, the first independent female detective, Miss Amelia Butterworth occurred in Anna Katherine Green's book, *The Affair Next Door* (1897). She was the prototype of the spinster detectives, which was a greatly suitable role to include her in more stories without having a man character beside her. The most efficient benefit of the spinster is that she is able to turn her low status to her blessing, by making people tell her information that they would never tell to a real investigator.

As a matter of fact, those writers who use this type of character are playing a 'double game' by using a usual female stereotype, namely the stereotype of a ridiculous old woman in order to demolish it. The writers who used this type of character created women who are rather heroes than heroines. There were many well-known writers in this time, which can be considered as a feminist writer, such as Dorothy L. Sayers, Anna Katherine Green or Amanda Cross.

However, it is not easy to decide, whether the “ Mistress of Mystery”, Agatha Christie was a feminist or an anti-feminist writer or she just wanted to find the right equality between the two aspects. Critics Margot Peters and Agate Nesaule Krouse claim that she is rather anti-feminist than feminist: “ Her [Christie’s] women are garrulous, talking inconsequentially and at length about irrelevancies. If young, they are often stupid, blonde, red-fingernailed gold diggers without a thought in their heads except men and money.

Her servant girls are even more stupid, with slack mouths, ‘ boiled gooseberry eyes’, and a vocabulary limited to ‘ yes’m’ and ‘ no’m’ unless, of course, they’re being garrulous. Dark-haired women are apt to be ruthless or clever, redheads naive and bouncy. Competent women, like Poirot’s secretary Miss Lemon, are single, skinny, and sexless. A depressing cast of thousands. ” It is certain that many of her most-known detective novels, such as *And There Were None*, *The A. B. C. Murders* or *the Murder on the Orient Express* present a wide range of stereotypical women: for example the empty-headed naive young girls or the gossipy old ladies.

In addition, her less-popular crime stories, such as *the Evil Under the Sun* has many anti-feminist features, like the case of Rosamund Darnley who gives up her big-city life and her career as a fashion designer for moving to the country and being a housewife and a stepmother. Although many of her less famous works have the same anti-feminist women pattern, she also created some excellent female heroes. One type of these women is those who are happy and competent in all fields of intention, like archaeology (Angela Warren, *Murder in Retrospect*), science (*Madame Oliver*, *The Big Four*) or acrobatics (*Dulcie Duveen*, *Murder on the Links*).

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Christie also creates a list of women who are independent of men's lives, namely the single women. This category includes the unmarried older women such as Jane Marple, lesbians (Clotilde Bradbury-Scott, *Nemesis*), feminists (Cecilia Williams, *Murder in Retrospect*), children (Geraldine, *The Clocks*) or handicapped women (Millicent Peabmarsh, *The Clocks*). Other female characters in Christie's works are interested in things, in which the traditional women-characters are not, such as philosophy and politics, for instance.

First time in the history of the genre of crime fiction, Agatha Christie creates some female heroes who have heroic attributes and who are able to achieve their goals, even when all the men have failed to do so, making it easier for women readers to identify with them. Such roles are for example Lady Frances Derwent (in *The Boomerang Clue*) or Emily Trefusis (in *Murder at Hazelmoor*) Christie also deals with problems that women have had to face over the centuries, living in a patriarchy, like the economic suppression of women or "the pressure to make themselves beautiful sex objects to allure men".

However, an examination of the 'Queen of Crime's' sixty-six detective novels and hundreds of her women characters can show that there might be anti-feminist factors in her works, but she obviously admires women and has a sympathy for the feminism. The fact that she prefers Miss Marple to Hercule Poirot, calling him "an ego-centric creep" can also confirm this statement. She once said that her writing itself was a feminist act. The previous examples are mainly supporting characters of Christie's novels.

However, she also created many feminist main characters in the role of a detective.

Naturally, Miss Jane Marple is one of these investigators, but there are other women who occur as a detective in her novels. Tuppence Beresford is an excellent example of the man-dependent detective women. She solves crimes only as a hobby, helping her husband, Tommy Beresford who has an investigator-office. The fact that she occurs only in four books, but Christie kept her alive over 50 years and let her go through developments, such as marriage, having children and grandchildren makes some people think that her character might be a projection of Agatha Christie herself.

The most-known and the most famous female detective character of all crime stories is certainly Christie's Jane Marple, or as everyone knows her, Miss Marple. She was not the first independent detective woman in the history of crime fiction and she was not even created in the 'Golden Age', however, her popularity overtakes many of her predecessors, such as Dorothy Sayers' Miss Climpson or Patricia Wentworth's Miss Silver. Miss Marple's first appearance was in 1930 in *Murder at the Vicarage*. After this debut she showed up in twelve novels and short stories.

She is a perfect example of the earlier mentioned spinster character. When we first meet her, she is already an elderly lady and we do not know anything about her life when she was young. She is a short, white-headed, innocent-faced old woman who takes advantage of her humble look. Miss Marple was not a professional investigator, but she was a true-born detective. She used her age and her looks as a camouflage to solve the

mysteries she encountered. She seemed to be a senile spinster, asking harmless questions during the investigation.

Her hobby was hand-knitting which motif has a special meaning in Christie's stories as it can not only confirm the harmlessness of Marple, but it can also symbolise the way the old woman binds the happenings of the mystery. In her character Christie clearly used feministic features. Miss Marple was an independent unmarried old woman who was able to achieve successes in her life without having a man by her side. Her popularity was competing with Poirot's fame at the time of the publication of these books, but Christie never denied her preference for Miss Marple.

Thus it is not surprising that the leading-character of Christie's last printed book, *Sleeping Murder* (1976) was Jane Marple. Considering these facts, on one hand, Agatha Christie might not have been a feminist writer because she produced many characters and stories, in which anti-feminist principles turned up; on the other hand, in the characterisation of her beloved spinster detective figure, Miss Marple, she includes every aspect that a feminist writer would also involve.

In addition, because of her special feelings which she only had for this character, she can particularly be considered as a feminist writer. To summarise the previous paragraphs, we can determine that feminism have been present in every aspect of life since the twentieth century. Earlier it had been almost impossible to imagine a woman in the role of a detective who investigates a murder or any other violent crime.

However, feminist writers were able to outstep this obstruction of this genre and they were able to create many transitional roles for women to participate in crime stories until they produced the perfect figure of the detective lady. Since then women personas in these kinds of novels are completely equal with the men characters, sometimes - as we can see it in the case of Agatha Christie's Miss Marple - they are even more beloved than the male figures. As a conclusion, feminism has reached its aims in the world of crime stories as well as in other parts of our lives.