

# Miss jane marple and miss cordelia grey

Literature



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At first blush it is difficult to imagine two women who are more different than Miss Jane Marple, the cozy amateur detective featured in Agatha Christie's *At Bertram's Hotel* and Miss Cordelia Grey the protagonist in P. D. James' *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. First, Miss Marple is a good deal older than Miss Grey, although their lifetimes overlap.

Secondly the times and worlds they each occupy vary considerably. Lastly, Miss Marple's life experiences appear to have occurred in the village St. Mary Mead. Cordelia Grey however has never really known a home and has lived throughout Europe. However, after sorting through the differences between the two women it becomes clear that each has the necessary qualities necessary to play the role of mystery novel detective.

Time provides the most obvious focus between these two novels and their main characters. Miss Marple's age is not revealed, but Lady Selina, herself sixty-five-years-old notices Miss Marple's arrival with the observation "I do believe that's old Jane Marple. Thought she was dead years ago. Looks a hundred" (Christie 4). Cordelia Grey is only twenty-two-years-old in *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*, but it is not just the difference in their ages that separates the two women, it is the difference in time.

Although *At Bertram's Hotel* takes place in London in 1955 and *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman* takes place in London and Cambridge in 1972 the focus on time each novel has is quite different. *Bertram's Hotel* stands proudly in the mid-1950s looking backwards to an England that no longer exists except in the memories of the elderly and English films.

The management has created an artificial, refined world that caters to the aging members of Edwardian England who fondly recall their youth and to those Americans who want to visit the "real" England: hopefully the England from before World War I, but certainly the England from before World War II. Bertram's has changed over the years, but looks "precisely as it had looked in 1939—dignified, unostentatious, and quietly expensive" (Christie 1).

Miss Marple arrives for a visit after having previously stayed there when she was fourteen. Miss Marple brings with her not only her memories of her previous visit, but also a lifetime of memories of the people from St. Mary Mead who she has observed for a lifetime and has learned to recognize anomalies in the actions of others and has developed the habit of "picking" at these peculiar actions until she has revealed the reason for the action. In this process, Miss Marple has solved a large number of murder mysteries (Christie).

The 1972 world of Cordelia Grey differs greatly. Rather than focusing her interest backward at a childhood without a mother and most often without her father being part of her life, Cordelia Grey looks forward. She lives at a time when a young woman living in London has the opportunity to work in an increasing variety of careers. Despite this relaxing of social attitude toward the role of women in England, Cordelia has stumbled into the detective business, a most unsuitable career that she intends to master (James).

Unlike Miss Marple who has a treasure trove of memories to guide her in her investigations, Cordelia Grey has had a short life and has had almost no

training to work as a detective. Although technically a partner, Grey's training has been limited to basic training in the use of fingerprinting and similar techniques. Her real training has been the often-repeated litany remarks of her late partner Bernard G. Pryde. Pryde was fired from the CID section of the Metropolitan police because of his inability to put together facts and solve cases. He had however taken to heart the teachings of Superintendent Inspector Adam Dalglish and always had a proverb at hand to help with the current situation. Miss Grey calls these to mind as she proceeds throughout the investigation (James 56, 211).

Miss Marple appears to have spent her life at home, working in her garden except for occasional trips such as the two to Bertram's and a trip to the Caribbean that had been paid for by her nephew. Her world is St. Mary Mead, a microcosm sufficiently diverse to have allowed her to develop a keen sense of observation that is adequate to the world outside St. Mary Mead. Cordelia Grey, however, has lived in a series of foster homes after her mother's death while giving birth to Cordelia. Her father was a fascist poet and not much of a father at all, prompting Cordelia to conclude that the six years she spent at convent school due to a clerical error were "the most settled and happy years of her life." (James 68).

The similarities between the two are quite striking. Both women are extremely intelligent though Miss Marple often appears as a twittering and reminiscing old lady (Christie 36). While at convent school Cordelia Grey had learned that she was smart and that "she needn't to conceal her intelligence, that cleverness which a succession of foster mothers had somehow seen as a threat."

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She was offered a chance to take her A-levels with the hopes of a scholarship to Cambridge, but was forbidden to do so by her father who unfortunately chose to appear at the time (James 68-9). Miss Marple and Miss Grey have a strong attraction to what is orderly and proper. Miss Marple always awakens early; she has her breakfast at eight-thirty and enjoys a "real breakfast" with "proper eggs" (Christie 33-35). Even though her partner has died, she attends to the business, even though there are no clients, "cleaning, tidying, rearranging . . ." (James 22).

She carefully plans what clothes she should take with her to Cambridge while she conducts her investigation (James 43). When the investigation is over Miss Grey takes the time to finish spading the last two feet of the garden row the murder victim had failed to complete before his death, as if it were one more unsettled task that needed to be completed. Finally, these women are tenacious as terriers. If either of them notices something that is not quite right they will fuss at it and fiddle with it until it makes sense and is reconciled to their satisfaction.

Ultimately both Miss Marple and Miss Grey are, in some respects, different faces of a modern, female Janus, the two faced god with each face pointing in opposite directions. The elderly Miss Marple steadfastly faces back in time toward the Edwardian England she remembers and prefers; the young Miss Grey who eagerly faces forward, looks hopefully toward the future.

Despite this different temporal orientation, each woman keeps one, boldly curious, wandering eye firmly in the present time and location. Each woman notices the unusual in the midst of normalcy, seeks lies in the midst of truth,

and discerns the sinister among the innocent. Despite the great differences between them, they are in many ways kindred sisters or perhaps kindred grandmother and granddaughter. Both women successfully engage in activities deemed "unsuitable" work for a woman. Despite this they succeed in discovering and righting the wrongs even though the men around them have failed to do so.

### **Works Cited**

Christie, Agatha. *At Bertram's Hotel*. New York: Bantam Books, Agatha Christie Mystery Collection, 1987.

James, P. D. *An Unsuitable Job for a Woman*. New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1972.