Suspect Behaviour
A Gender Perspective on Male and Female Characters in Two Detective Novels by Agatha Christie

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Abstract

This essay is a gender analysis of some of the characters created by Agatha Christie. The aim is to investigate the occurrence of gender stereotypes and if traditional gender norms are challenged by men and/or women characters in *Evil Under the Sun* and *The Body in the Library*. Initially, there is an introduction to gender theories which includes the theorists Thomas Laqueur and Simone de Beauvoir among others. Laqueur presents the evolution of gender theories, specifically the two-sex model in which it was believed that sex is pervasive and thus the body rules the mind. Theories presented by him are vastly different from those of de Beauvoir who argues that the mind and body are separate. Other theorists which specifically deal with crime fiction and gender include Susan Rowland, who writes about the reformation of the detective and how the crime genre is gendered, and Gill Plain, who has been able to categorised Christie’s characters into three distinctive groups in which gender roles are clearly distinguishable.

The conclusion reached is that male and female characters are portrayed both as adhering to gender roles, contemporary to the time at which the books were written, and as breaking them. However the outcomes and reactions differ depending on the character in question. Marple and Poirot appear to be well aware of the stereotypical way they are viewed and use it to appear less intimidating in order to hide their true nature as two sharp intellects.
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Introduction

This paper seeks to analyze how gender stereotypes are portrayed and challenged by looking at characters created by Agatha Christie as well as making a more thorough analysis of Jane Marple and Hercule Poirot. They feature in a number of books as they are her most well-known characters. The novels used as the primary sources for this essay are *Evil Under The Sun* and *The Body in The Library*. The books were written in 1941 and 1942 respectively and chosen for their relative proximity in time in order to exclude skewed results due to historical events which may have happened between the publication of various books over a wider time span. However, but as the books tend to be written in an anachronistic fashion, the importance of the world wars has been rendered less important, even if they may be mentioned in dialogue. Detective novels strongly adhere to specific conventions and are generally conservative, however they do not necessarily have to be bound to a specific time. Susan Rowland claims that detective fiction is conservative as the mission of the detective is to return to a former state. Nonetheless, a change in gender perspective occurs.

The purpose of this essay is to observe the occurrence of gender stereotypes and traditions of that time such as views on marriage and independence and if these were challenged in these novels. I claim that Christie’s novels embody a break of traditions such as view on sexuality, working women etc. This in turn would represent forward thinking and progress while retaining old traditions, and by that token also retaining gender roles, would be conservatism. However, as Christie's novels contain dramatic irony one cannot assume that what she writes are in fact her actual beliefs or intentions. Furthermore, there will be an analysis of the detectives and what aspects of their characters that could be traced to either gender stereotypes.
The analysis will begin with presenting theorists central to my understanding of gender. Simone de Beauvoir and Thomas Laqueur make up the basis for the theory of sex and gender as their texts provide two different outlooks which are central to this essay. De Beauvoir’s main argument is that the body is not essential to a gender identity whereas Laqueur through his study of the evolution of gender presents the opposite idea where the body, historically, has been continuously linked to identity. De Beauvoir published *The Second Sex* in 1949 thus her thinking about sex and gender was produced roughly around the time when Christie was publishing the novels I examine. Consequently it is necessary to not only present her theories but also use Laqueur’s historical account for gender theories as the 1940s marked a new way to view gender and one needs to be aware of what existed prior to that. The second part of the theoretical framework will be dedicated to a focused view on Christie and her novels and how she has been interpreted by theorists such as Gill Plain and Susan Rowland. While these theorists write of gender they have not made a direct comparison between characters or detectives, which this essay aims to do.

Rowland and Plain both greatly discuss the importance of gender and how it influences the detective genre. The change the detective genre underwent with the arrival of Poirot resembles the transition from biological determinism to the theories of de Beauvoir in the sense that it was a radical change from previous conventions. In these books by Christie one can also view this transition, as characters and events mark a change from previous conventions.
Gender Theories

The theoretical background will be divided into sections. The first has the primary focus of introducing sex and gender theories. From the very beginning it is important to differentiate between the concepts of sex and gender. Toril Moi in her essay *Sex, Gender and the Body* says that sex relates to biology and human physiology (29). In other words, when one refers to male or female, one refers to the biological sex. Gender is often mistaken as being synonymous to sex. However, gender is socially constructed and thus not something that simply exists in certain shapes of the human body. Hence what is seen as masculine and feminine are also socially constructed and refer to gender to gender. In this context it is important to emphasize is that the concept of gender is not limited to one's sex. For example, one does not have to be male to be masculine.

However, as Thomas Laqueur writes in *Making Sex* this was not always the norm. Laqueur gives an historical account of how sex and gender have been viewed over the course of history as well as the cause and effects of those ideas. During the enlightenment what is now called the two-sex model was created (149). It means that sex is pervasive. A person’s biology determines a person’s actions. If someone were to drift from this, that person would be considered “unnatural” as Moi puts it (13). The two-sex model was in essence created at the same time as science began to look more closely at the bodies of men and women and came to the conclusion that men and women are inherently different (Laqueur 158-159). The way of thinking that men and women can only embody their sex is called biological determinism (Moi 15).

Biological determinism, and the implications of that, are discussed by Simone de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex*. That a woman would even consider the possibility of not having children meant that she was flawed. The reasoning goes as follows: as biological determinism
signifies that the body and its functions determine the person this would also mean that since a woman can carry a child she must also, by the same token, wish for it. Therefore a woman who did not wish to become a biological mother must in some way be physically and mentally flawed (de Beauvoir 509). Interestingly, Christie's character, Rosamund, reasons about if a woman must have a child and marry in order to be complete as woman and finds herself feeling conflicted. This conflict, which a woman may experience, is of great significance to de Beauvoir in which she says “... a situation does not depend on the body; it is rather the body that depends on it” (736). By this, she means that the body is only a part of one’s situation rather that constitute the entire situation on its own.

Moreover, this famous quotation marks a great change from what Laqueur describes. What de Beauvoir means is that the sex does not mean that your gender is determined. She does say that a person's sex is important to that individual but that there is more than just sex. Where biological determinism argues that your sex determines who you are, this theory aims to dispel such ideas. Her stance on biological determinism is: “But we must only note that the varieties of behaviour reported are not dictated to a woman by her hormones nor predetermined in the structure of the female brain: they are shaped as in a mould by her situation” (de Beauvoir 628). With such beliefs she created a new way of viewing the female sex which in other words is that one is not born a woman but one becomes a woman (283). Christie’s characters generally demonstrate how being of a certain sex also should determine how one acts which closely resembles the theories presented by Laqueur. However the same, and other characters, also exhibit tendencies which resemble de Beauvoir’s arguments.
A modern theorist by the name of Raewyn Connell, the author of *Masculinities*, also discusses the idea that being of a certain sex does not negate certain behaviour or wishes. Connell's study is not only modern but also originates from Australia using mostly male Australian participants (99-100). We find similarities between what they say in their interviews to views expressed by male characters in *Evil Under the Sun* from 1944. His study shows that it is just as important to realise that men, as well as women, do not all fit into one cohesive category but should be viewed as a diverse group. In Christie’s novels there are many different male characters who are not all the same simply because they are men. This is similar to what Connell argues for in his study. In order to do this, he conducted numerous interviews with male subjects in order to see the occurrence of male gender roles and how they were interpreted by men. From a wide range of social groups he is able to see a large spectrum of gender images all belonging to the male sex. Thus being of a certain sex does not automatically mean one will be a certain way. For example, one of the groups he interviewed were people who would belong to the “bad boy” group who most often had grown up in poor or broken homes. This means that a person, given a certain set of circumstances, is likely to act in a predetermined way.

This is furthermore reflected in the books by Christie as Poirot, as well as Marple, sometimes comment on the inevitability of making certain decisions, such as committing a crime. Connell made this apparent in his study as he was able to show that if these men had experienced certain events they also were more likely to adhere to certain behavioural patterns.

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1 To research about men in this manner would only have been considered to be of importance in our modern era. In the past it was not considered necessary.
Placing Theory Within the Detective Genre

The Golden Age was an era in which female crime novelists rose to stardom during the 1920's. In the book Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell Susan Rowland analyses these very women and their literary works and writes about what influenced them.

Prior to the Golden Age, Sherlock Holmes was the iconic detective and he gave rise to “the Holmesian legacy” (18). Rowland demonstrates that female writers made use of this legacy and adopted it into their own literary works, constructing their own characters with contrasting characteristics along with traits similar to those of Holmes. Thus, they used the masculine mould that Holmes symbolized and created feminine male characters that went against the norm (21). This is an example of how the rules of biological determinism are to some extent shed and how characters, such as Hercule Poirot, were created as they breaks the existing heroic mould of that time.

The anti-heroic model that was created when the masculine mould was broken (Munt 18) is said to have strong connections with the post-World War I mentality as described and discussed in Sally Munt’s study Murder by the Book: Feminism and the Crime Novel by using Julian Symons (cited in Munt 14). The traditional ways of thinking were not wanted as they represented war and death. Rowland argues that while the detective genre usually was conservative, the authors active during the Golden Age often refrained from writing conservatively. Merely apprehending the criminal does not change the standing social order which can be argued caused the crime in the first place (40). This further conflicts with the notion that the crime genre is conservative.

This can furthermore be seen in the relationship between Hastings and Poirot. Poirot as a foreigner represents a new way of thinking and is greatly different when compared to Hastings. Hastings is with his mannerisms and interests made into a typical English man.
Rowland brings awareness to Hastings’ name which was picked with great care as he shares the name with the battle of Hastings (Rowland 63). Rowland considers the duality to be a double act with the intent to convey irony. Furthermore, irony, as well as dramatic irony, is a common tool used by Agatha Christie throughout her novels (63). These characters and the roles which they have been assigned are groundbreaking on their own and mark a clear break of the conservative detective genre. However, like a traditional detective novel she also retains the conservative aspect. In a detective novel it is the job of that very detective to create order where peace has been disturbed. This means, in essence, that the goal is to return to a former state, which would represent conservatism (Rowland 42). However, as she continues, the authors that she analyses actually display an outright aversion to the old conservative, in this case, English ways. While this is true in Christie's works, one can through the coming analysis also see that, in some instances, characters and events are described in a way that favours conservatism.

Poirot along with other prominent male protagonists such as Roderick Alleyn or Albert Champion were depicted as breaking the previously used Holmesian mould. Rowland uses the term “Holmesian confidence” which, unsurprisingly, originates from the style in which the stories of Sherlock Holmes were told. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle had a main protagonist with abilities that, to spectators, seemed inhumane. His way of being was very original and as Rowland describes, uninviting (19). As a reader one would not be able to relate, which is why breaking of the “Holmesian confidence” and the creation of the anti-heroic model means that there is a possibility that the detective might be wrong. Consequently, the detectives appear more human as their errors are more relatable (19).

Moreover, the detectives are often shown to both follow police procedures, which would connect to the masculine sphere, but they also carry traits and habits that would be
considered feminine (19-20). This infusion is needed because, as Rowland describes it, the crimes take place in the home or in workplaces where men and women work together and in order to solve the crime they would have to be able to move in both spheres. Furthermore, in order to solve the crime they need to be able to work and investigate in places that are seen as predominantly feminine as well as areas which are considered to be predominately masculine (20). While Rowland focuses on the detectives individually this essay will as previously stated make a direct comparison between the two as well utilizing supporting characters in order to establish the gender roles and attitudes present in the books.

While Rowland mainly deals with the detectives, Gill Plain, in her study *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body*, widens her analysis to include several character types. Plain has through her analysis been able to reveal three types of female characters that recur in Christie’s books. The first one is the Grand Dame, and this type is often, but not always, a mother. Symbolic for this character is how she often shows proof of great self-restraint as well as self-sacrifice. This character type is portrayed as the epitome of a pure and feminine woman. The second type is the Deadly Seductress who may be a mother but is most often portrayed as unmotherly. As the name implies this character would also be enticing and aware of her own charms in order to attract men. The last type is the Boy-Girl and as Plain claims “the antithesis of traditional female sexuality" (43). The Boy-Girl would be a woman that challenges the stereotypes set by biological determinism.

With these theorists in mind I would now like to go deeper into the primary sources and the characters within.
Evil Under the Sun

In *Evil Under the Sun* the detective solving the case is Hercule Poirot. This is not his first case or the first book written about him. One can then argue that his character has already been well established, since many years have passed since his debut. Thus one does not have to be concerned that Christie is still experimenting with character development. In this particular story we follow Poirot to a resort where he ends up meeting several characters. He does get the feeling very early on that something sinister and unavoidable will happen.

The main plot of this story is to uncover the truth and capture the culprits responsible for the death of the murdered Arlena Marshall. She is a famous actress and she is known for her beauty and her reputation as an adulterer. She is married to Kenneth Marshall, a widowed father who is well aware of her reputation to the concern of his childhood friend Rosamund who also joins them at the tourist resort.

Rosamund is somewhat at the periphery of the book, but important for this essay. In this analysis her conversation with Poirot will be analysed. Rosamund was chosen as a character to be analysed as she represents a modern woman caught in between the changing times. From their conversation one will be able to see this conflict as she is very troubled by her situation. Christie herself, does not include her in the main cast as she only appears sparsely but she does get her moments in the book as well as getting somewhat of a happy ending.

In the following conversation between Poirot and Rosamund they discuss her marital status:

‘Of course – I haven’t got a husband! I’ve failed there, haven’t I, M. Poirot?’

Poirot said gallantly:
‘Mademoiselle, if you are not married, it is because none of my sex have been sufficiently eloquent. It is from choice, not necessity, that you remain single.’

Rosamund Darnley said:

‘And yet, like all men, I’m sure you believe in your heart that no woman is content unless she is married and has children.’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘To marry and have children, that’s the common lot of women. Only one woman in a hundred – more, in a thousand, can make for herself a name and a position as you have done’.

Rosamund grinned at him.

‘And yet, all the same, I’m nothing but a wretched old maid! That’s what I feel today, at any rate. I’d be happier with twopence a year and a big silent brute of a husband and a brood of brats running after me. That’s true isn’t it?’

Poirot shrugged his shoulders.

‘Since you say so, then, yes, Mademoiselle.’ (Evil Under the Sun 32)

To begin with one can see that Rosamund displays a number of thoughts and beliefs that she has about herself; how she views women and how she believes men view women as well as how society regards women such as her. Consequently, she accounts for her own interpretation of how an ideal woman should be like. In her own mind she considers herself to be like a “wretched old maid” because she does not have a husband. However, in response to Poirot and his remark that she is special among women Rosamund uses the phrase “And yet, all the same”. She does agree with Poirot, however even as she agrees she can just as easily say that she is nothing but an old maid. The ambivalence that she then displays makes it important to differentiate between what she wants, what society wants, what men want and
what she believes they expect from her. In light of this one cannot be sure that what she feels is her own true feelings, or rather if her wants and desires are simply a product of the demands and expectations from society.

Secondly, one can argue that the conflict resembles the conflict where a person wishes to separate gender and sex. As was previously discussed, Laqueur's presentation of the two-sex model meant that the body has not just an influence on the mind but complete control (220). When Rosamund says that she should want a brood of kids she is agreeing to the conventions of the two-sex model. Her conflicting emotions resemble the transition from biological determinism to something more closely related to de Beauvoir. Rosamund does not feel like a woman in the eyes of society as she does not have children or a husband. De Beauvoir was the one to argue that the body is a situation (736). As previously explained this means, in essence that the body is only a part of a situation with many more aspects to consider. With this way of thinking, Rosamund does not have to have children or a husband as being a woman is more than being a wife and a mother. Rosamund is conflicted because she can be said to be standing in between these two views and thus, feels unsure if she can or should be more than her body and struggles to see her body as a situation. The reasons for her conflict as well as her reactions are various. She displays an understanding of her situation and makes it clear as to why she is feeling this way.

Thirdly, Rosamund's own remedy to change her situation and her state of mind implies that she would go from one bad situation to another. The big silent brute, as she describes the man, represents abuse and violence. In addition, at the moment she seems to be financially independent and can afford a fancy vacation while in her vision she would settle for "twopence a year". She says she would be happier with this, but she contradicts herself by making statements that would not symbolize happiness. With that in mind it becomes unclear
whose happiness she has in mind because it most certainly seems as she does not see the joy in marriage or children.

Finally, another possible reason for Rosamund's confusion could be her love for her childhood friend Kenneth Marshall, who is married to Arlena. This unrequited love might be one reason why she desires marriage but has been reluctant to marry already. Her continued questions might be a manifestation of her own confusion, as well as the sadness she feels for the position she feels somewhat forced into. She might feel torn between whether it is marriage and the idea of being a wife that she desires or if it is her feelings for Kenneth that make her feel confused. It may also be the case that she needs to lose her masculine traits and become more feminine in order to be accepted as a potential love interest.

With Plain's stereotypes in mind one can clearly see that she, at the moment, is between the Boy-Girl and the Grand Dame (Plain 43). Plain does not herself use this character to exemplify these character types but as they are used as a representation of all of Christie’s characters they may also be applied here. This transition also makes it clear how difficult it is to use these character types as characters most often do not fit into just one. Her position as being between these two character types is made even clearer as one compares her to a list of masculine and feminine traits (Moi 103). From this list one can see that she is ambitious, independent, individualistic, self-reliant and self-sufficient. Many of these traits manifest themselves in her being a successful business owner. However the same traits are also the ones she seems to believe are the ones not suited for her as a woman. As for her feminine traits they are: affectionate, compassionate, loyal, and sympathetic. Throughout the book she is spoken about as a loyal and warm person. She is also favoured as a suitable mother figure for Kenneth's daughter whose biological mother passed away when she was still a young
child. These various personality traits are also the reason why she can be seen as two character types.

This conflict is in a sense resolved at the end of the book as she seems happy and content. The final words in the book are spoken by Rosamund and Kenneth in which they discuss marriage and their future where Kenneth says that they should move to the countryside and for her to abandon her “damned dress-making business” to which she reminds him that she makes good money out of it (319). She ends up agreeing to give up the business only after teasing him about if she felt he was more important to her than her business. One can argue that she sheds the conflict and makes a choice. Moreover, one can argue that the conflict was not resolved as she did, which she argued society expected of her. However the qualities making her a successful business woman are still hers. She reached a compromise instead as she was in control of her own situation and even went as far as to be the one to propose. In a sense she became a woman by following her own path much like de Beauvoir argued women should do (736).

The one who listens to her dilemma is Hercule Poirot who also, in part, responds to her statements. Poirot says that men fail to be sufficiently eloquent which is the reason she is not married. He talks of no other qualities that a man should have in order to be considered a suitable husband for Rosamund. It should be pointed out, however, that Poirot regards her status as unmarried as a matter of choice rather than of necessity or being unable to marry. This means that Poirot sees it as a possibility that a woman can choose to remain unmarried.

Poirot says that indeed the most common situation for women is that they are married but that Rosamund has accomplished something that makes her special and rare amongst women. Interestingly, he does not outright say that it is positive that she is special and rare. Instead, he just states how he views it, thus keeping his own feelings away from the subject.
Although he does this, the fact that he is not averse to the idea of a woman working instead of being married, shows that he believes in independent women. The conversation ends with yet another question from Rosamund that shows that despite the encouraging words from Poirot she still does not believe that she can be accepted. Poirot's response to this is that if she says so, it must be so. In addition to his spoken words he also shrugs his shoulders. He does this several times during their exchange which could mean that he is distancing himself from the subject as he does not really care or have an opinion about this matter. Thus his responses may suggest alternate opinions, or perhaps lack of them. He may also be friendly enough to keep the conversation going while he is passing judgement and collecting information as per his nature as a detective.  

Nevertheless, Poirot does not chastise her for being unmarried, which she expects. If one compares Rosamund to other female characters one can see that others are gossiping ladies, cheaters as well as murderesses. Her altogether different persona stands thus in stark contrast to other characters which makes her seem even more glorified. This is ironic as it is not how she views herself.

In the same book one finds Arlena. She is a film star and married to Kenneth Marshall and is the stepmother to his daughter. Arlena is however a very seductive woman and easily attracts the attention of men. In comparison to Rosamund she is a very different character. In the following passage it is written about how Kenneth reacts to her flirting with another man at the hotel.

‘It’s so unfair blaming me. I haven’t done anything
- anything at all. I can’t help it if – ’

He prompted her.

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2 This can also be seen Poirot’s Early Cases when he congratulates a woman for her modern ways only for him to become restless as he does not get answers to his questions (62).
'If what?'
Her eyelids fluttered.

‘Well, of course. I know people do go crazy about me. But it’s not my doing. They just get like that.’

‘So you do admit that young Redfern is crazy about you?’

Arlen muttered:

‘It’s really rather stupid of him.’

She moved a step towards her husband.

‘But you know, don’t you, Ken, that I don’t really care for anyone but you?’

She looked up at him through her darkened lashes.

It was a marvellous look – a look that few men could have resisted. (Evil Under the Sun 45)

In regards to Arlena's personality one can clearly see that she is The Deadly Seductress stereotype that Plain describes (43). Even while Arlena is with her husband she would use her feminine charm to affect him. This can be seen by how her “eyelids fluttered” as she spoke to her husband while gazing through her “darkened eyelashes”. She catches the attention of men by simply existing and she says herself that she does nothing to encourage this. Poirot himself is said to react to the mere sight of her, not unlike the other men present, but she also plays on her femininity when she tries to appease her husband. A woman who attracts unwanted attention might be regarded in a more lenient way but she does nothing to discourage the attention and rather seems to enjoy it. Her behaviour towards her husband is one thing that makes her an unlikeable character especially as her husband is determined to stand by her however much he dislikes her behaviour.
Additionally, despite her being murdered there is little sadness for her death because in the end she continued to be unfaithful. In *Evil Under the Sun* it is Kenneth who finds love in a woman with a greatly different personality. If his recently deceased wife would have been a character closer to The Grand Dame the fact that he finds another woman so quickly after her death would have been frowned upon. A woman that after her death remains as loved and cherished as she was in life leaves a much greater imprint. Arlena dies and is soon both forgotten and replaced by a woman her husband found soon after her death. The man in this case remained true to his wife, while she was alive, and would not abandon her despite her infidelity. The woman who was unfaithful and disloyal to her husband ended up dead while the woman who remained by his side gained, what she considered to be the love of her life. Kenneth on the other hand gains a faithful wife. This can be viewed as certain behaviours being projected as desirable. By acting in an inappropriate way would consequently result in being killed off. Rosamund who does act in a way that the book portrays as desirable is instead left to live and as far at the plot goes, gets her happy ending. However, dramatic irony needs to be taken into consideration as Christie may simply be emphasizing on how women who do not adhere to social norms and standards are cast aside or killed off in favour of what is often referred to as the Grand Dame.

Arlena would be the character who is most likely to be killed off as she is a sexually active woman and does not confine herself to the socially constructed norms. She is very alluring and can easily attract men and therefore cause women to dislike her and her own husband to doubt her. In addition, she is not described as having any other qualities beyond those that can be connected to the Deadly Seductress. When one investigates the meaning of

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3 That female characters after their deaths are considered to not be missed and even better off dead are not uncommon in Christie’s novels. In *Appointment With Death* a woman is murdered and Poirot in turn is urged to not pursue the case as the one who committed the murder is thought to be innocent considering the nature of that deceased woman.
the name Arlena one can find that it means promise or oath (Meaning-of-names.com). The connection one may draw from her name, and Arlena herself, is that she is a woman that exudes a promise that men adhere to. Even while not explicitly written one cannot be certain how far she takes the affair which makes it difficult to draw further conclusions.

In contrast, there is Rosamund whose name has the meaning of pure rose or rose of the world. Rose has the accrued connotations of purity and of love. Pure means untainted and innocent and in the book, that is also how she is described. Moreover, one can consider the depiction of her in the book as a metamorphosis in the sense that she was a rosebud and then became a beautiful rose and managed to attract the attention of the man she loved. Beyond this transformation one can also see the conflict of changing from a Boy-Girl to the Grand Dame and that the metamorphosis relates to that change.\(^4\)

**The Body in the Library**

In my discussion of *The Body in the Library* the focus will be on the comments Miss Marple makes about how women are supposed to behave, how the supporting characters think about women in general and also how men are viewed. In this particular book the one solving the crime is Jane Marple, an elderly unmarried lady, who with her keen sense of the human nature wishes to help her friend whose husband is accused of murdering a young girl as the body was discovered in their library. It was thanks to the deceased cousin that the police investigators were able to establish the identity of the deceased girl to be Ruby Keene. Men across the village are questioned because they were reported to have been close to the deceased.

\(^4\) Rosamund is by no means a unique character created by Agatha Christie to undergo this metamorphosis. In *The Moving Finger*, Megan embodies the character of the Boy-Girl. By the end of the book she has undergone a transformation to become a lady.
In this book social differences and upbringing suddenly make an appearance\(^5\). Social upbringing is something which Marple makes comments about when she draws conclusions about a person since a major theme of the book is missing identities. Miss Marple herself is able to make deductions on whether it is possible for someone to be the person they claim to be, based on their appearance. This can be seen in the following quotation in which she is looking at what it first assumed to be a woman named Dinah, but as she is very much alive they must then find out who she really is.

‘… That, of course (I don’t want to be snobbish, but that’s what a girl of - our class would do. ‘A well-bred girl,’ continued Miss Marple, warming to her subject, ‘is always very particular to wear the right clothes for the right occasion. I mean, however hot the day was, a well-bred girl would never turn up at a point-to-point in a silk flowered frock.’ \(\text{The Body in the Library}\ 203\)

The body is later on reported to be Ruby Keene as she is identified by her cousin, Josephine. However, Josephine is lying as the girl is in fact a girl scout made to look like Ruby in order to establish alibis for Josephine and her partner in crime. Two types of girls are however described by Marple, one who is implied to be of a higher class and one who is not. What separates these two women comes down to their physical appearance and grooming. What is suggested is that a girl who is not “well-bred” would dress in a suggestive way with no concern for how others regard her while a well-bred girl would be constantly aware of this and dress accordingly.

Miss Marple identifies herself as being among the well-bred class as she in the quote distances herself from the girl by saying that “our class” would not behave in that way. Her remark that she does not want to be snobbish could be regarded in several ways. One way

\(^5\)This is compared to \textit{Evil Under the Sun} which lacked this theme. There are however numerous other books which has social upbringing as an important theme.
could be that she is in fact being snobbish but does not wish this to be how she is seen by others. It might also be that she is just stating something that reflects her background and that in her mind she is not being snobbish but a woman of her generation. Once more, one must consider dramatic irony which means that Marple may simply be used to visualize the aspects of the English society which at the time were criticized. The books are first and foremost entertainment fiction and thus it is difficult to establish if the purpose of the books is to be a media of social critique.

The do’s and don’ts of ladies from certain circles is the key to solving the case. Marple herself, states that a well-bred girl would not care for comfort as appearance would be more important. This can be seen in the quote when she says” I mean, however hot the day was, a well-bred girl would never turn up at a point-to-point in a silk flowered frock”. Through these continuous conclusions she was able to deduce the true identities of the deceased women.

How appearance reveals things about one's personality can also be shown in the following passage in which the later revealed killer, Josephine Turner, makes an appearance. The thoughts and the impressions made are from the official investigator in charge.

She was a good-looking young woman of perhaps nearer thirty than twenty, her looks depending more on skilful grooming than actual features. She looked competent and good-tempered, with plenty of common sense. She was not the type that would ever be described as glamorous, but she had nevertheless plenty of attraction. (*The Body in the Library* 47)

In this quotation we once again return to the physical aspects of a person and how these reflect that person’s character. The text does not reveal what it is about her look that makes her seem competent and good-tempered. What is, however, told about Josephine is that she is not exceptional in any way. She has “plenty of common sense” and will never be regarded as
“glamorous” but she does indeed have “plenty of attraction”. Even in the very beginning it states that it is more about grooming than what she was born with. Later on in the book it is actually revealed that this woman is the criminal mastermind who goes to great lengths to make sure that she, along with her partner, is not suspected of murder.

The investigator comments that there was nothing physically exceptional about Josephine and he was through his observations able to make several statements concerning her personality. While he did not say she was a beauty he did say that she was attractive enough but that was because of skilful grooming rather than being a natural beauty. He does not give substantial enough information for one to draw the conclusion that she is acting in an overly feminine or masculine way.

The description is, however, based on an observer, in this case a police officer, and one must take that into account. Firstly, one may draw the conclusion that, as Marple later says, men are unable to discern all the aspects of a woman. A second reason is that he is the police in this story and the one in charge of solving the crime with the aid of Marple. Thus, because he is not the main character he is unable to see her true nature as Marple, as the main character, is supposed to do so. A third reason may be that the detective sees a stereotypical woman. She is quickly labelled based on her appearance and he is thus unable to see anything specific to that individual.

Marple’s belief that men fail to think clearly when it comes to women can be seen in the following passage in which she describes men and their view of themselves. She speaks to Mark, a friend of one of the men who are currently suspected of having murdered the girl:

‘Gentlemen,’ she said with her old-maid’s way of referring to the opposite sex as though it were a species of wild animal, ‘are frequently not as level-headed as they seem.’
'I'll say you're right,' said Mark. ‘Unfortunately, Miss Marple, we didn’t realize that. We wondered what the old boy saw in that rather insipid and meretricious little bag of tricks. But we were pleased for him to be kept happy and amused. We thought there was no harm in her. No harm in her! I wish I’d wrung her neck!’ (The Body in the Library 142)

To begin with one can read about what Mark says about the young woman. A man that regards women as playthings bears an uncanny resemblance to Connell and his participants that shared similar views on women. One man believed that men were allowed to have fun with women and that women were supposed to knew their place (Connell 133-134). Mark may, in this context, be seen as a stereotypical man when compared to Connell’s participants. He is a man used to having his way and seems himself as being above others. In the quote alone one can see that the girl is barely regarded as a human being and instead comes across as a toy. Marple on the other hand has something of her own to say about men.

Miss Marple is in this quote stating that men are not aware of their own lack of “level-headedness” and is thus saying that they are not as conscious of their own thoughts as they might think. It is of great importance to be aware that the reference to women and their view of men is not exclusively made for Miss Marple but of all women in her situation. Thus, one cannot think of Miss Marple the investigator but of Marple, an elderly unmarried woman. The stereotypical elderly woman is what others would first see when they encounter Miss Marple. She is unmarried and must then have little to no experience of men and would regard them as dangerous and unknown.

However, Marple's comments about men show great insight which would not exist if she saw men as simply something feral and unknown. Marple is, in some instances, desexualised as she is not viewed as a woman but as a symbol of justice while in other
instances referred to as an unmarried woman much like in the quote. However, even here one can see traces of yet another conflict. Marple is stereotypically indeed the old unmarried woman which further emphasises her character as being desexualised as there is no man in her life and as far as we know, there never has been. She has, however been able to use that in order to make observations enabling her to draw conclusions, in this case about men. Thus the conflict therein is who she pretends to be, what she allows others to think and lastly what she truly is.

Rowland regards Marple’s analytical approach as something very characteristic of her since she categorizes people and makes the claim that people are no different no matter where you go (51). While Marple is seen as a gossiping old spinster she is also able to use this to her advantage in order to use her great insights to human behaviour which opens up the possibility that she may just pretend to be this way in order to fool other characters as well as the reader. A two-faced woman is often regarded as a deceitful person, however as a reader of these books, one does not consider Marple to be deceitful. This may be for several reasons. One is that she is the protagonist and the detective that in the end will see that justice is served. Another reason why the reader accepts this deceit is because she has been desexualised. She is not seen as a deceitful woman as one does not view her as a woman.

Her desexualisation becomes all the more apparent when one glimpses her brilliant mind. Up until the dénouement of each story she plays the part of the sweet gossipy old woman and adheres fully to this stereotype. At the end, when she reveals that she has been able to analyse the situation and solve the case, one can see that there is a lack of markers turning her into the stereotype. This two-facedness would, as previously mentioned, be regarded with suspicion but once more due to her desexualisation she is able to move between roles without the reader questioning the situation.
From the man, who speaks at the end of the quote, we encounter the theme of social upbringing and how men and women are viewed differently. This time the man is considered to be of a higher class. By his peers it can be seen that it is acceptable that he had a “plaything” which is how the deceased woman is remembered. It is not about him that bad words are spoken, it is the girl who is referred to as a bag of tricks which means that his activities were acceptable while hers as a woman were not. Just like in *Evil Under The Sun* we encounter a woman that has passed away but is not really missed and is even after death spoken ill about. This further emphasizes how women who do not adhere to the social norms in terms of their sexuality are more likely to be killed off and quickly forgotten about.

However unlike characters from *Evil Under The Sun* these characters are not as easily placed in Plain’s categories of female characters. The murdered girl, nor the murderer, fit in any of the stereotypes. The one who can be argued to fit a stereotype is Mark whose actions and opinions are similar to those presented by Connell. Through this one can once more see that while Plain’s stereotypes may be accurate for some characters they are very narrow and are unable to include all of the characters.

**Comparing the Two Detectives**

Between Marple and Poirot one can see similarities as well as differences that may or may not be caused by being of different genders. By using the books presented as well as others the goal will now be to further establish the motivations and characteristics of the detectives and how they can be viewed when compared to each other.

Hercule Poirot is, as argued by Munt, often referred to as the “little man”, thus making him less than a man. The conclusion that she draws from his feminine ways of being is that Christie rejects the male hero model. She also emphasises this by saying that Hercule who
shares the name with the half-god Hercules while his last name, Poirot, refers to a clown turns him into parody personified before anything more is known about him (Munt 8). While he is a walking parody it is also he who bests even the most brilliant of evil masterminds. Because of this irony found in the very core of this character one has to consider the implications it has for all his actions.

Furthermore, Munt writes that even though Poirot is physically male he still embodies femininity (8). Moi’s list of characteristic assigned to either sex, which was presented earlier, may be applied to determine if these characters are masculine or feminine (Moi 103). Poirot is affectionate, cheerful, compassionate (not always true but in general he shows a compassionate side), flatterable, loyal, sympathetic, understanding and warm. When one then compares the list with Munt’s claim one is able to see that she is quite correct in her statement. Furthermore, in Poirot’s Early Cases he responds to the statement that he cannot possibly understand the feelings of a mother by saying “But yes, but yes, I comprehend perfectly. Have faith in Papa Poirot” (81). Furthermore, he does also have masculine traits and since he is a man he can move freely between masculinity and femininity.

In Evil Under The Sun, Poirot is not depicted as behaving as the other men did at the sight of an attractive woman. He does not find the women with the bathing suits being attractive because they reveal too much skin and lay there as bodies “- arranged on slabs - like butcher’s meat” (Evil Under the Sun 14). He is, however, at the first sight of Arlena said to have a moustache that “quivered appreciatively” (22) but quickly recovers to take notice of another man who showed no reaction to her dramatic entrance. While he does embody femininity he is still attracted to women when he at one point speaks warmly of the appeal of seeing a beautiful ankle. His view that women flaunt their bodies too frivolously than what he would like suggests that he is a man of tradition. However one can, through his conversation
with Rosamund, see that he was not against a woman striving to create something new for herself that was different from what society expected of a woman.

Beyond being a feminine man he is also a foreigner and considerably different to the Englishness one finds in Hastings. Hastings is a dear companion to Poirot who is regarded to be a tool to break the “Holmesian confidence” (21). Hastings who one first meets in The Mysterious Affair at Styles becomes frustrated with Poirot’s methods and would rather take action in a more physical way (Mysterious Affair at Styles). Hastings would be the contrast to Poirot. Not only are they from different countries, they also have different ways of analyzing a situation. Hastings is depicted as being rather gullible and easily believes women and considers himself as coming to a lady's rescue. Poirot on the other hand takes his time grooming himself and questioning people, and is less naive than Hastings, and thus, has a much greater success in solving the crime.

In the end it is the method that Poirot uses that solves the case. Hastings is in the very first book rather sure that Poirot is wrong and does not blindly accept what Poirot says. Nevertheless, the Belgian and his methods win against the English way. This once again can be referred back to the anti-heroic model and the connection to the post-World War I mentality (Munt 8). Moreover, it may also be more than just the English way that loses to the Belgian way. Poirot and his feminine way of being stand in stark contrast to Hastings and it is also Poirot who prevail and it is the hot-headed man that loses. Hastings is indeed a hot-headed man but he is most often so when it comes to women or when a certain degree of violence needs to be used. Rational thinking aside, they are both very different men while also being quite similar. Their values are often similar even while they have different ways of approaching a problem. They believe in justice and they both go to great lengths to ensure that justice is served. But there are also character traits which are decisively dissimilar. One can
argue that Poirot represents a new man, who with his supreme ability of rational thinking, is not in any way less qualified because of his feminine ways.

What is more, this rejection of the male hero model can be found in Miss Marple as well as she is the polar opposite of what one expects of the lead detective. To those she meets she is the typical gossipy, always knitting and harmless elderly lady. Because of Poirot’s femininity one could say that these two characters are indeed feminine but of different sex. One may also argue that these two characters have been desexualised to some extent. While Marple’s sharp and analytical mind could be stereotypically male one does not think of her as one which further shows how she has been desexualised. What is more, they do not engage in flirtatious banter with other characters and are not regarded as eligible romantic interests, whereas other characters would be. One must also consider that detectives are rarely shown to be eligible as romantic interests which in turn mean that this is not a genre convention which has been broken as her two main detectives adhere to the pre-existing genre conventions.

Poirot may, however, express appreciation for a beautiful lady such as his reaction to when he first saw Arlena while Marple would be hesitant to make such remarks of the opposite sex.

However, regardless of Poirot’s feminine ways he has an easier time being accepted and can during his cases operate while being visible because he is a man and an acclaimed detective. A case featuring Miss Marple rarely shows her getting as intimate with a crime scene as Poirot. Her presence is always questioned and in some cases it is only through gossip and questioning that she can solve the crime. Poirot has somewhat of a confidante in the police force in the form of inspector Japp but he also has the aid of Hastings. Miss Marple might on occasion call upon the help of her nephew but there are no recurring characters such as Inspector Japp or Hastings that could vouch for her credibility as well as ability. Because of this, she will most often be judged based on her sex which she will later prove is not all that
defines her. Once again we see how her sex determines people's attitude towards her. This is solely based on the assumed gender role she would fit into as an elderly unmarried woman. Along with this one can see how Miss Marple is portrayed in the books as being a woman who loves gossip and no matter which case she is working on she can draw parallels to St Mary Mead, the small village in which she lives (Rowland 50-51). Quite often she also narrows down the motive of the crime and further emphasises that no one is unique and is very often able to solve the cases by drawing comparisons to other people in similar situations.

In *The Body in the Library* one can see how Marple reacts to a couple who breaks the traditional norm about marriage. This couple who are new residents in a small town chose to keep their marriage a secret which makes the villagers think they lived together without being married. Miss Marple can see from their behaviour that they are a married couple and not just casually dating as they wanted people to think. “There is a prejudice in old-fashioned country districts against people living together who are not married” (238) says Miss Marple to a woman who has pretended to not be married while in fact she was. Through the text one cannot say that Miss Marple herself identifies with the old-fashioned people. However she does regard herself as being of a higher class. This once again returns the topic to the question of whether the books display a wish for progress or conservatism (Rowland 42).

In order to clarify the author’s intent one must again consider the use of dramatic irony and the influence it may have on the characters’ statements. Marple and Poirot have opinions which could be regarded as conservatism while they also opt for progress. One must also consider the characters which represent a traditional and conservative England. Rowland has after reading the books been able to see that traditional class-society England most often
represent deceitfulness and immoral people (43). As for Marple she can be regarded as a woman ahead of her own time but has learnt to play the game to her advantage.

One may see her modern way of thinking in the previously given example with the unmarried couple. What is more, she does not single out the man or the woman as being worse than others for not being married. However, as has previously been mentioned one cannot overlook Christie's use of dramatic irony which forces the question of the book's real stance on this matter. Miss Marple explains that she deduced that they were married because their fights were something that was common for newlyweds. Her observation is that married couples actually enjoy the quarrels and the reconciliation that follows. The stereotypical way she views this married couple is related to what Rowland says about Marple’s habit of comparing new people to people from her hometown (51). She makes references to them and is able to deduce the reactions of these strangers simply by knowing that they will act in a certain way because she has seen it before in St Mary Mead. This is because the types are there, the wants and wishes are there but some might in the end act differently when put in the same situation. Furthermore, one can argue that Marple’s habit is a manifestation of dramatic irony as the events taking place in this microcosm, which is St Mary Mead, is applicable to larger and more gruesome events.

Moreover, Marple, as a woman, regards herself as being above the common class and is thus more aware of such things and therefore chooses to consider it more. Poirot focuses more on the personality and how people carry themselves. This could be because he himself is judged from his own appearance as well as his background as a foreigner. When people see him they see a short stout man while Miss Marple is merely looked upon as a woman. In both characters however, when the first judgement have passed and their brilliant minds are shown
the attitude towards them changes and they are regarded with equal parts of fear and admiration.

Poirot, however, is more accepted but that is because he has become a household name due to his success as a detective. Marple has no such reputation as she operates in the shadows and does not take credit for her accomplishments, much like Sherlock Holmes whose objective never was fame or glory but to allow his mind to work. By the next case she is not recognised and has to fight for acceptance once again. This constant battle to be recognised and to prove that she is more than the stereotype they place her in is recurring for the majority of her novels. However, as she is well aware of how others view her she makes great use of this to her advantage. Marple is not an advocate of women's rights and instead one can say that she accepts society as it is but turns it around in her favour.

She first appeared in *The Murder at the Vicarage* and already from that first book her mild demeanour is questioned. Her two-facedness is observed by Griselda who makes the following comment:

“Miss Marple is a white-haired old lady with a gentle, appealing manner – Miss Wetherby is a mixture of vinegar and gush. Of the two Miss Marple is much the more dangerous.” (*Murder at the Vicarage 14*)

This shows that she is unable to fool people who already know her. Poirot is expected to be analysing everything as he is a private investigator but as Marple appears to be only a sweet old lady others may face her with some suspicion.

Poirot is confronted with a different challenge due to his foreign heritage. Eccentric behaviour is much more prominent in Poirot which is made apparent when observed by others who then consider him to be a "funny Belgian". While his foreignness is remarked upon, it has little to no effect on the treatment that he receives. While Marple's status as a spinster may
also connotes to a degree eccentricity. Poirot's ways are alien through and through. He does not act in a way that is expected of a man, aside from his rational thinking which at the time was considered effeminate as men were supposed to act and not sit idly by, as Poirot at times seems to do. However, he does not act in a way that is stereotypically Belgian as there is no clear stereotype of Belgians. This makes him a joker as he is an exaggeration and as Munt puts it, a clown (8). A reason for Christie decision to make him Belgian may be that there is no stereotype regarding Belgians which may not have been the case with, for instance, an Italian or perhaps French, which he is often mistaken as. By making him Belgian, Christie is allowed to make him foreign without having to worry about pre-existing notions of native Belgian people. Regardless of this, it is still apparent that it is more important to be male than female in spite of that person’s behaviour as Poirot's “weirdness” is more likely to be accepted because he is male.

To sum up, the characters are indeed very similar and they do face difficulties due to misguided assumptions. However, Poirot can still be regarded as having a less difficult time because he is a man. Poirot’s foreignness is never forgotten and he is nearly always referred to as Monsieur Poirot. Marple is a woman who most people would regard as an old unmarried woman with a passion for gossip. Her role as a woman in a situation dominated by men is never forgotten and she has to prove her value. This means that while they do share difficulties it is not based on the same reasons. Thus similarities become differences.
**In summation**

The purpose of this essay was to establish how gender stereotypes were used and if they were challenged. If one first looks at the male characters one can see that they are indeed very different. In the analysis four male characters were used in smaller or greater extent.

Hastings represents, in Christie’s novels, the traditional English man. However he is not conservative altogether as he also enjoys seeing technological advances. In the books he often sees himself as a man whose duty it is to protect women. Another man is Kenneth Marshall, who remained faithful to his wife and abjured the thought of a quick marriage and a quick divorce. He wants the idea of marriage to return to something more old-fashioned when it was not considered to be something one did without care or thought. Being old-fashioned is not always considered positive however. Mark from *The Body in the Library* is described as a man who does not treat women well, which was shown to be similar to men in Connell’s study.

The final man, and also the most prominent, is Poirot. He was created in order to emphasize the difference between conservative thinking as well as represent something modern. His creation, from his name and origin, was by no means a coincidence. By making him Belgian, Christie is free to assign whatever characteristics she wishes as there are no preconceptions of what a man from Belgium is like. He is portrayed as a feminine man and often refers to himself as Papa Poirot. He is a new man in a modern world. The two-sex model argued that being male also meant that one was programmed to act in a certain way while theorists such as de Beauvoir argued that was not the case. One can say that Poirot then symbolizes the transition between these two theories. Munt argued that his persona makes him a clown and while this may be so, one can also say that it is ironic that what is needed to break gender stereotypes is a clown.
Secondly, there is a group of women which this essay dealt with. From *Evil Under the Sun* this essay mainly dealt with Arlena and Rosamund, two very different women. Rosamund, just like Poirot, is argued to symbolize the transition from the two-sex model to the theories of de Beauvoir. Rosamund is shown to be unique at the same time as she is very similar to the Grand Dame. Opposite her in the book was Arlena who was portrayed to be a sexual predator, who might have attracted the attention of men when she was alive but was quickly forgotten about after her death. These two women represent stereotypes while one can argue that Rosamund at least struggles to accept this stereotype. In *The body in the Library* Ruby and Josephine are cousins. While one is first led to think one is actually looking at the body of Ruby one is actually looking at the body of Pamela, a girls scout. Miss Marple was able to draw conclusions on the mistaken identities based solely on superficial evidence such as the condition of the girl’s nails. Josephine is not consciously breaking away from stereotypes. Rather one can say that the male detective fail to see anything else but the female stereotype.

The last woman is Marple who can be said to embody her stereotype. This is however far from the entire truth as she, like many other characters, does not remain in the confines of their respective stereotype. Marple works in a patriarchal society and, unlike Poirot, her presence in a crime scene is always questioned. Her skills and analytical mind is not taken seriously and she consistently has to prove herself before she is accepted. This essay has argued that Marple because of this makes a conscious decision to conceal herself in her stereotype in order to appear less threatening. By doing this she can attain information while appearing to be an innocent and gossiping lady. At the dénouement of her stories she often takes the centre stage and explains the order of events as she has been able to deduce them. She lets her intellect shine without hesitation and she sheds the stereotype. She was a woman
ahead of her own time, much like Poirot. They are however different as Poirot does not have
to downplay his intellect while Marple has to.

In conclusion, characters in books by Christie do adhere to the contemporary gender
roles of that time. A portion of her characters can be divided into groups based on their
personality, as shown by Plain. This essay has however been able to show that a number of
characters cannot be placed in groups with such narrow definitions. Characters were at times
conservative and at times more modern and opinions were at times met with negative critique
as well as positive. While it was not necessary to desire marriage it was important to respect
the sanctity of marriage. Christie’s novels represented the rebirth of the detective genre and
thus contained a number of modern feminist views as well as retain older values.
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