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**THE FUSION OF INVARIANT FIGURE-TYPES AS BLOCK
ELEMENTS IN AGATHA CHRISTIE'S WORKS**
BA thesis

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ABSTRACT

Since detective fiction conventions have a strong influence on mystery writing in general, it is appropriate to examine the ploys used in the creation of whodunits that form the structures that uphold the central mysteries of the stories. Combining the concept of invariant figure-types and the theory of block elements, we can examine one of these ploys in the works of Agatha Christie, the most recognized Golden Age detective story writer whose writing strategies have greatly influenced our overall understanding of the genre's conventions. The main goal of this BA thesis is to analyse Christie's works to understand how the fusion of invariant figure-types is used to create block elements that stop the readers from immediately predicting the ending of the stories.

The literature review section of this thesis gives an overview on the conventionality of detective stories, Christie's adherence to these standards and also her deviations and innovations. The terms of invariant figure-types and block elements are introduced to form the theoretical background to the analysis. The empirical study section examines three of Christie's novels – *Murder Is Easy*, *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *Death in the Clouds* – with special attention on the characters of the novels and the roles they play in the mysteries, particularly the characters of the culprits, to identify the block elements created by the fusion of invariant figure-types.

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INTRODUCTION

The history of detective fiction and whodunits is not considered a long one; the earliest distinctive example is usually recognized to be the works of Edgar Allan Poe (specifically *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*), though it is not irrational to find something dating even further back, for example in gothic tales of horror (Matković 2018: 446; James 2009: 6). After all, detective fiction is, if judging by sales numbers only, one of the most beloved forms of literature, having gained its wide popularity with the Sherlock Holmes stories by Arthur Conan Doyle (Cawelti 1997: 6). In the course of its relatively short history, however, it has formed its fair share of idiosyncrasies. It is “a frankly non-serious, entertainment form of literature which, nevertheless, possesses its own rules and standards, its good and bad examples, and at its best has won the right to respectful consideration on its own merits” (Haycraft 2019: 10). As such, it is appropriate to examine these rules and standards of the genre, which in their clear distinctiveness (and often also repetitiveness) can find themselves as the butt of many jokes and parodies.

Detective novels – crime stories where there figures an investigator character that solves a mystery –, by their nature, are meant for light reading, to escape in a moral fantasy of an escapist ideal world; they provide relief from the stress of everyday life, hence their popularity often increases during and after times of great societal disturbances – notably, the Golden Age of detective fiction during the period between the two world wars (Matković 2018: 448). The detective fiction subgenre – including specifically its variety of whodunits, stories with the central mystery of “Who has done it?” – is differentiated from other fiction, even general crime fiction that is much broader in its definition, by “a highly organised structure and recognised conventions” (James 2009: 5).

What we can expect is a central mysterious crime, usually murder; a closed circle of suspects, each with motive, means and opportunity for the crime; a detective, either amateur or professional, who comes in like an avenging deity to solve it; and, by the end of the book, a solution which the reader should be able to arrive at by logical deduction from clues inserted in the novel with deceptive cunning but essential fairness (ibid.: 5).

Of course, this definition is very limiting and may not necessarily apply to all detective novels; however, it is a closed description such as this that allows us to look at the traditional (Golden Age) conventions of a detective novel and analyse their subversions and other deviations. Criticism of this type of fiction often deems the pattern-based stories “mere formula writing”; yet, as the great variety of different books and authors shows, the limitations can instead liberate the creative imagination (ibid.: 5).

Agatha Christie, one of the leading figures of the Golden Age detective fiction, can undoubtedly be called the most popular detective story author the world has seen so far (see Brown 2013: para. 3). She was a prolific writer with a bibliography of eighty crime novels and short story collections, a career spanning from the year 1920, when her first book *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* was published, to her death in 1976, and it is fair to say that the fifty-six years in business offered the “Queen of Crime” a part in the developments of these standards that form the detective fiction genre. Due to the popularity of her repertoire, Christie’s writing has thus formed much of our understanding of the genre’s format, conventions, clichés and plot-construction schemas. The secret to Christie’s success could be said to be her mastery of the careful detail-oriented methodology of creating whodunit plots and characters and, due to the multitude of her stories, distinct patterns of different ploys and methods can be found throughout her books. Despite Christie’s novels belonging to the landscape of early 20th century literature, their role as a source of inspiration for contemporary authors has kept them relevant to this day: they are still being actively read and referenced, their established formulas still noticeably present in modern literature and cinema.

Detective fiction often finds itself being criticised for its simple entertainment value and lack of depth; however, understanding the rationale of how various elements and ploys come to be is crucial in recognizing where the true complexity of the genre lies – its

structure. The conventional ploys of detective stories, after all, influence the construction of different mysteries outside the genre as well and are of importance in literary analysis on the whole. The aim of this BA thesis is thus to analyse one of Agatha Christie's formulas of writing a detective story and how it fits into our understanding of detective novel conventions. One of Christie's methods of hiding the murderer and keeping the readers absorbed in the story to the end will be the main focus of this work as it exemplifies the general methodological approach to Christie's writing. The method of interest, in this case, is the fusion of invariant figure-types which concerns the characters of the stories, the roles they play in the plot, the readers' assumptions of these roles and how the author can use these expectations to their advantage in creating block elements. The main objective is to examine if and in what way Christie uses the fusion of invariant figure-types to create block elements that stop the readers from immediately figuring out the solution of the crimes.

The literature review section of the thesis will give an introduction to the concept of the "least likely person ploy" and look into the general criteria for the ploy as well as the reasoning behind the use of certain formulas and plot-construction schemas in detective literature in general. Furthermore, the literature review will give an overview on the conventionality of the genre, Christie's awareness of these conventions and how she uses them to deny the readers' expectations by following certain methodology. For the analysis, the difference between Watsonian (intradiegetic) and Doyleist (extradiegetic) viewpoints will be explained as it will further aid in the understanding of the relationship between authorial intent and the readers' reception. Based on previous works by other authors, the literature review will then introduce the concepts of invariant figure-types, their fusion and block elements.

The combination of these concepts along with the application of the idea that this method of using fused figure-types as block elements is used by the author to toy with the readers' expectations of detective fiction's conventionality will be the main concern of this thesis. The empirical study section includes the analyses of three of Agatha Christie's whodunit novels to examine her use of fused figure-types and what role these fusions play in the overall story. The novels are *Murder Is Easy*, *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *Death in the Clouds*. Based on these analyses, a conclusion will be drawn, summarizing the similar patterns of logic, how these block elements influence the reader (depending on their Doylist or Watsonian readings) and how a simple concept like the "least likely person ploy" can actually be broken down to more complex schemes.

CONVENTIONALITIES AND PLOYS IN DETECTIVE FICTION

In order to fully understand the reasoning behind the use of the fusion of invariant figure-types as block elements in Christie's work, we have to first look into the general conventionality of the detective fiction genre and the ploys that are created due to this conventionality, in addition to seeing why these conventions exist in the first place. Since the focus of this thesis is on the fusion of invariant figure-types specifically, we will examine closely the characters of detective novels and explain the concepts of invariable figure-types and block elements to form a theoretical basis for the empirical study.

Least likely person ploy

Usually detective stories begin by introducing the setting, the general atmosphere, the characters and their relationships; the crime is generally murder and the circumstances of the murder are mysterious, often seemingly impossible (Matković 2018: 458). Most importantly, there figures a detective, who, as argued by Haycraft (2019: 232), is "in

distinctive need of a personality”. Finally, there is a solution in which the culprit is identified and order is restored to the disturbed society (Matković 2018: 458). As evident, a detective novel exists inside a clearly regulated field of pre-existing formulas, the so-called “canons of fair-play”, that arguably are always the focus of the true enthusiasts of the genre. The London Detection Club – where Christie was also a prominent member among other famous Golden Age crime novelists –, for example, set strict rules to writing detective stories, such as that the culprit has to appear or be mentioned early on in the story, no supernatural elements are to be involved and that the detective cannot have committed the crime or solved the mystery by intuition (Burnsdale 2006: 9). S. S. Van Dine’s *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* is a prime example of how people saw the genre functioning only with a set of firm regulations (see the list in Haycraft 1947: 189-195). According to Xu (2009: 133), these disciplines of the detective novels are requirements for a good story as no digressions are allowed.

Due to this limited playing field and the authors’ attempts to trick the reader within these parameters, we witness a great amount of the unfortunate butlers and gardeners who tend to end up as the culprits of the stories as a result of what is generally known as the “least likely person ploy” – a device by the author of the novel that has the least likely character(s) to have committed the crime ultimately actually be the guilty party (Merrill 1997: 92). As something that has been in use since the conception of the genre, it is a general consensus that the device is a fundamental standard (ibid.: 92). This ploy has gained its popularity among crime novelists in response to the audience’s need to be constantly surprised, its usage in constant fluctuation, even during the Golden Age at the beginning of the 20th century, as Haycraft (2019: 121) points out in the differences between the “old-style” and the “new-style” of detective stories – most likely in reflection of the

readers' changing habits and expectations as well as of the already existing body of works that form these expectations.

It is not then unexpected to find the mentions of this “least likely person ploy” among many responses to Agatha Christie’s works. In 1926, Christie published her sixth and most controversial novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* that is now considered one of the cornerstones of the genre (see Brown 2013: para. 1). At the time, it was revolutionary. “When in the last dozen pages of Miss Christie's detective novel, the answer comes to the question, ‘Who killed Roger Ackroyd?’ the reader will feel that he has been fairly, or unfairly, sold up,” writes *The Scotsman* on June 22, 1926. The novel with its spectacular solution that the murderer had been the narrator himself transformed the readers’ understanding of the rules of fair-play, taking the “least likely person ploy” to the extreme. Some readers even felt that Christie had crossed the unmarked borders of good conduct and considered the plot a “foul play” due to the unreliable narration (Haycraft 2019: 130). Van Dine called it “bald trickery, on the par with offering some one a bright penny for a five-dollar gold piece” (quot. in Singer 1984: 166,167). On the other hand, other critics, such as Dorothy L Sayers, felt that it was the obligation of the whodunit reader to consider everybody a potential suspect (Edwards 2015: para. 8). Whether it broke the rules or not, Christie demonstrated with this novel her penchant for using the ploy in rather unexpected ways. As is also highlighted by Makinen (2006: 118) in an analysis of femininity in Christie’s works, Christie’s “predilection to choose ‘the least likely suspect’” has created rather subversive (female) characters that deny textual and cultural conventions.

It cannot be left unmentioned that a simple generalization that Christie always uses the “least likely ploy” is untrue. Xu (2009: 133) claims that the traditional structure of the ploy – murder takes place, detective follows the clues, suspicion goes from one suspect to another until finally it lands on the real culprit for whom it had seemed to be impossible to

commit the crime – is unquestionably followed until Christie’s innovations. They assert that Christie develops the ploy to the point that it can no longer be called the “least likely suspect ploy” as it is the “never suspected persons”, characters that do not appear as suspects in the first place, that end up as the guilty party (ibid.: 134). Furthermore, they theorize that even though Christie seems to favour the “least likely suspect ploy” at the beginning of her career, the later novels are much more advanced in their structure, even using the “most likely suspect ploy” (for example in *Death on the Nile*) and “equal opportunity suspects ploy” (in *Evil under the Sun*) (ibid.: 134, 135).

As evident in the short story collection *Partners in Crime*, where Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, a young married couple who, at the request of their old friend from British Intelligence, take over the International Detective Agency, solve a series of cases that act as parodies of the works of different detective novel authors (such as Conan Doyle and G. K. Chesterton), Christie is intimately familiar with the genre and its conventions, going so far as to parody her own detective, Hercule Poirot. In *Murder Is Easy* Christie (2002a: 143) writes: “Apart from the theory of the ‘least likely person’, he saw no reason for retaining Mr Jones on his list of suspects.” – with one quip, she acknowledges the existence of the ploy and uses it to tease the audience’s Doylist readings of detective stories (more on this later). Again and again, Christie uses the readers’ expectations against them, not necessarily by using the “least likely person ploy” but with “generic blockers”, as named by Singer (1984: 167). In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* the narrator is the murderer; in *Death on the Nile* and *Murder on the Orient Express* there are multiple murderers; in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* it is the character that has already been suspected by the police but released from custody due to the evidence against their guilt; in *Curtain* the eventual murderer is Poirot himself – the solutions to the mysteries are

surprising because the audience expects certain conventional roles to remain immune (ibid.: 167-169).

Satisfaction from non-arbitrariness

Revzin (1978: 386) calls the plot-construction schemas the syntax of a detective novel and, much like the syntax of a language, the plot construction of a detective novel operates as the body of principles that govern the composition of the novel and the logic behind its storyline. All the aforementioned rules of detective fiction exist because the reader needs a satisfying experience. The satisfaction from reading a detective novel comes from the “non-arbitrariness of the solutions” (Singer 1984: 159). The primary task of the author is not to come up with a convoluted plot that astonishes the reader with its twists and turns but to convince the reader that the solution they have provided for the mystery is the most logical one out of all the possibilities (ibid.: 158). According to Singer (1984: 159), Christie has had the greatest success in satisfying her readers. In contrast with Conan Doyle and his Sherlock Holmes stories where the satisfaction comes from Holmes’ unorthodox deduction methods, Christie usually relies on providing the reader with a more-or-less equal opportunity with the detective in the story to figure out the true solution (ibid.: 161). Thus, the reader will experience great fulfilment when the answer is finally revealed and they can see all the clues that they have witnessed presented before them with an adequate explanation.

Naturally, there are two ways of studying detective stories: through a Watsonian perspective or a Doylist perspective (see L M Dee 2016: para. 3-5). A Watsonian (or intradiegetic, as it is generally known in narratology) view means that the reader finds “in-universe” explanations to the problems that the story raises. This usually includes following the storyline and the clues of the crime alongside the detective, receiving the

same amount of information as they and trying to find a solution to the problem within the same parameters as the characters in the story, much like Dr Watson in the Sherlock Holmes stories by Conan Doyle. A Doylist (extradiegetic) view, in contrast, implies that the reading is done acknowledging that the writer is the authority who has created the story and who has the right to impose a pre-determined solution. This means that the reader recognizes the authorial intent and reasoning for creating certain story elements, applying an omniscient viewpoint. Reading a detective novel through a Doylist perspective often results in the reader trying to analyse the author's plot-construction schemas, paying more attention to recurring patterns over multiple books and evaluating how these schemas and patterns fit in the genre's general conventions. However, when readers start applying too much Doylist reasoning to their reading, seeing the author following the aforementioned criteria of the genre and the formulas that these criteria imply, they can find themselves dissatisfied when the solution of the story is not extraordinarily unusual or innovative. It is important to note that a constant subversion of the genre's conventions is not the best writing strategy to avoid predictability – subversion itself is not immune to becoming a convention and thus expected. A Doylist reading may not necessarily offer the best reading experience and the satisfaction that is the key to a well-written detective story. As expressed by Cubbison (2012: 141): “While fans recognize and do engage in Doylist readings, they tend to find Watsonian readings more engaging.”

Due to the non-arbitrariness of the solutions, the ploys used in the creation of detective stories must have strict criteria to offer this necessary satisfaction to the readers. In the case of the “least likely ploy” particularly, the story must usually have many suspects – in Christie's stories it is often twelve, as indicated by Merrill (1997: 88), it being a number that balances the desired complexity and an excessive crowd – but none that appear as the obvious culprit until the final revelation. In Christie's works each character in

a collective of suspects has to keep the readers' interest and thus they are not usually fully developed during the course of the story as the author needs to spread the attention equally among the cast not to reveal the solution (Merrill 1997: 89). The murderer is also generally not a character that has not been introduced previously. They can be undistinguished but not obscure (ibid: 89). Even in the case of seemingly arbitrary murders in *The A.B.C Murders*, the first suspect, a travelling salesman with epilepsy and memory loss, turns out to be innocent and, instead, one of the previously introduced characters that gained something from one of the murders is revealed as the killer, contributing more to the readers' overall satisfaction than an unknown serial killer would. In what is described by Cawelti (1976: 77) as the "magic circle", the culprit can be a marginal figure but never outside of it (Merrill 1997: 92). More often than not, especially in the case of the "most likely ploy", the structure of the novel largely depends on the ingenuity of how the crime has been committed since it must withstand the readers' scrutiny from the beginning to the end of the story (ibid.: 91).

Characters and their figure-types

As already established, the creation of the characters plays an important part in the overall formation of a successful detective story, from the personality of the detective to the ambiguousness of the suspects but most importantly the identity of the culprit. There are three points to be taken into consideration when creating (or, from the readers' perspective, accusing) the guilty party: the personality or predisposition, evidence and motivation. In order for a culprit to be successfully accused, all three aspects must fit the supposed solution to the crime. There needs to be evidence pointing against the accused, their alibis must be disproved and there must be something that sets them at the scene of the crime. When there has been a premeditated crime, there also has to be some gain for

the culprit; or in the case of unplanned crimes, some motivation that made the culprit commit the crime. As a character's personality is often what the reader will first acknowledge when becoming acquainted with a new figure, it is arguably the most influential of the three aspects since the reader is usually used to questioning the truthfulness of the characters' motivations and alibis. The personality, however, is also something that can be deceiving – people, especially murderers, are not always who they seem.

As a result of detective fiction's conventions and repetitive patterns, a standard set of character roles can also be identified in the general canon. Revzin (1978: 386), in their notes on the semiotic analysis of detective novels, identifies a set of invariant figure-types that recur in detective novels. They are different characters from different books with similar personalities and functions in the storyline that can be grouped together under one label to describe their purpose in the plot. Some generalized examples from Agatha Christie's works include

(a) the person who has an interest in the murder (usually not the murderer), (b) the person who planned the murder (not necessarily the murderer), (c) the person who committed the murder, (d) the investigator, (e) the investigator's assistant, who is also the narrator (...), (f) a sympathetic but weak young creature (of either sex), (g) a kind old creature (of either sex) and (h) the victim (ibid.: 386).

These figure-types are usually established at the beginning of the story; they can be combined together in one character or they can be duplicated between multiple characters; but most importantly, the reader is given false impressions using these figure-types, which means that the solution of the story is usually revealed along with the revelation of the fused types (ibid.: 386). These false impressions are usually based on the readers' preconceived notions about people's personalities, particularly the personalities of murderers and criminals. Whereas an experienced reader, who often applies a Doylist perspective to their reading, may know that the rules of the game in detective fiction differ from the real life, an average audience is likely affected by a prejudiced understanding of

what a criminal mind-set must be like: that premeditated murders are committed by calculative and steadfast people and that spontaneous crimes are driven by passion and thus the criminal must be a person easily affected by emotion. The fusion of different invariant figure-types as a writing strategy allows the author to use this prejudgement to their advantage as a ploy that hides the culprit by denying the reader's expectations.

Block elements

Block elements, or Gestalt, (as coined by Robert Petsch and referenced by Georges and Dundes 1963: 111) is a term used in describing riddles in studies of folklore. Riddling is "a form of social interaction that involves an asymmetric power relationship"; there is a poser and a posee and it is the right of the poser to impose a predetermined solution to the riddle (Singer 1984: 158). This reflects the dynamic of the author and the audience of a whodunit as the writer is also an authority who presents a riddle (albeit not the riddle as defined by the study of folklore) to the readers. Hence it is appropriate to use the concepts of the devices of riddling strategies also to analyse the construction of a whodunit crime novel (ibid.: 158). One of those devices is a block element. A block element is a device that "closes the reader's mind" to the true solution of the mystery (ibid.: 160). As established previously, there cannot be anything arbitrary in the storyline because the main goal for the writer is to convince the readers that the solution provided to the mystery is the most logical and satisfying one. This also means that block elements are always very carefully calculated. They are vital to a whodunit since the writer needs to hide the end solution of the mystery until it is time to reveal it in order to keep the readers' attention until the end of the book.

According to Abrahams (1968: 151), there are four types of block elements: (a) a contradiction or opposition of traits, (b) not enough information, (c) too much

misleading/irrelevant information and (d) a “false Gestalt”. A “false Gestalt”, or when the answer is obvious based on the evidence but it is still incorrect, could also be considered a general analogy of a whodunit that allows alternative solutions and general misconceptions as a result of too much information and contradictions (Singer 1984: 164). The block element of too much information is generally known as a “red herring” – extraneous facts that lead the reader astray as they are not relevant to the central mystery (ibid.: 161). It is often the dominant strategy for misleading the reader (ibid.: 161). Even more characteristic of whodunits, however, is the block element of contradiction that usually includes falsified alibis and clues that forge the circumstances of the time, place and manner of the murder (ibid.: 162). More subtle than the contradictions in evidence are the contradictions in character: either in their physical abilities, their intelligence, their personality or their assigned figure-type (for example, Justice Hargrave being both a victim and the murderer in *And Then There Were None*) (ibid.: 163).

The fusion of invariant figure-types as a strategy of misdirection

Since authors of detective novels have to keep in mind the strict plot-construction schemas of the genre and the non-arbitrariness of the solutions when writing a story – for the sake of allowing the readers to follow along the plot by providing the necessary information so that they could start piecing together the mystery alongside the detective of the story for maximum satisfaction when the end result is revealed –, certain ploys have become standards in the genre, notably the “least likely person ploy”. Much depends on the characters of the stories: their personalities, motivations and roles in the overall plots. To describe the characters’ functions in the story, it is suitable to apply the concept of invariant figure-types. Block elements are the devices used by the author that stop the

readers from immediately figuring out the solutions to the mysteries and an important type of block elements is exactly the contradictions in character.

We can combine Revzin's concept of invariant figure-types and the riddling theory of block elements and say that in the creation of detective stories, one method the author can use to establish the block elements which stop the readers from immediately figuring out the solution is to fuse different invariant figure-types together and create contradictions in character. Based on the aforementioned famous examples from her bibliography, we can see that Christie is familiar with this method of defying the readers' expectations by fusing the figure-type of the murderer or an accomplice with certain conventional roles that the audience expects to remain immune. In the cases of novels such as *And Then There Were None* or *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the fusion is rather obvious as it creates the shock element that makes the stories so well known. But the method in its subtler form is perhaps more common than it first appears and it is the goal of this thesis to demonstrate this through the analysis of three novels by Agatha Christie.

ANALYSES OF CHRISTIE'S NOVELS

The main goal of this empirical study is to apply the concept of the fusion of invariant figure-types as block elements that was introduced in the previous chapter to three crime novels by Agatha Christie: *Murder Is Easy*, *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *Death in the Clouds*. The focus will be on the characters of the novels to analyse their position and role in the plot, determine their figure-type and study the character of the culprit in order to determine which figure-types have been fused to create the block element that stops the reader from immediately figuring out who the murderer is.

Murder Is Easy

Murder Is Easy is Agatha Christie's 25th full-length crime novel, first published in 1939; in the US, the novel was published in the same year under the name *Easy to Kill*. Largely overshadowed by *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, which preceded the novel and is known as one of her best examples of a classic "locked room mystery", and *And Then There Were None* (or *Ten Little Niggers* as was the title under which it first appeared), which was published roughly five months later and is considered one of the best crime novels of all time, *Murder Is Easy* still manages to capture the audience with its iconic small village setting and the character-types that can be found in such a setting.

The story revolves around a retired colonial policeman Luke Fitzwilliam who meets an old lady named Lavinia Pinkerton on a train ride to London. The woman is on her way to Scotland Yard to report a serial killer who has been murdering people in her home village Wychwood-under-Ashe but, as Luke finds out the next day when reading a newspaper, she is killed in a car accident before she reaches her destination. A week later there is another announcement in the paper of a death in Wychwood-under-Ashe, a Dr Humbleby, whom Miss Pinkerton had mentioned being the possible next victim of the killer. This causes Luke to start his own private investigation as he travels to the village to discover the truth. He stays with a cousin of his friend, Bridget Conway, who is engaged to the local Lord, Gordon Whitfield, and together they enquire about the suspicious but seemingly natural deaths that have taken place.

To exemplify how invariant figure-types can act as block elements, let us first identify the significant characters in the story. The main character of the story is Luke Fitzwilliam who plays the role of the investigator. The investigator's assistant, and also the lead's love interest, is Bridget Conway. The characters Amy Gibbs, Harry Carter, Tommy Pierce, Mrs Horton, Dr Humbleby, Rivers and Lavinia Pinkerton are all victims who have

been killed either before or during the events of the story. The main suspects are Mr Ellsworthy, a shopkeeper who performs occult rituals; Dr Thomas, the village doctor who worked together with Dr Humbleby; Major Horton, an enthusiastic dog-owner whose wife died; Mr Abbot, the local solicitor who employed Tommy Pierce; and, later, Lord Whitfield, the egocentric self-made millionaire who is engaged to Miss Conway. In addition to those characters there are also Dr Humbleby's wife and daughter – the latter is engaged to Dr Thomas; Mrs Anstruther, Miss Conway's aunt; and Honoria Waynflete, an old lady who helps with the investigation.

Since the story is told mostly from the investigator's perspective – not the first person but a third person limited narrative point of view as opposed to an omniscient view, which is rare in crime fiction –, then the audience is a witness to his biases: all the suspects are men. This, in a way, can be considered a “red herring” inserted by the author as there is no specific piece of evidence that indicates to the murderer necessarily being a man. In general, the investigation is more limited due to Luke Fitzwilliam not being the usual genius-type detective but rather an everyman kind of character, more like Captain Hastings than Hercule Poirot. In this aspect, *Murder Is Easy* still follows the convention of a traditional detective novel in which the reader is given equal opportunity with the detective to figure out the solution to the crime (see Singer 1984: 161); however, this means that the audience's view is also limited to what Luke knows and (often erroneously) deduces. In general, the novel does not offer many clues to the true solution and thus the satisfaction of the ending must come from the surprise, rather than the explanation that connects the evidence.

One of the most important clues given to Luke Fitzwilliam by Miss Pinkerton that is stressed on multiple occasions is something that Luke tends to ignore in his investigation: “It's very easy to kill – so long as no one suspects you. And you see, the

person in question is just the last person any one *would* suspect!” (Christie 2002a: 22). Luke repeats this thought to himself later but he emphasizes the part that says that it is easy to kill, not that it is easy to kill because nobody would suspect you as the murderer, not realizing the true implication of Miss Pinkerton’s suggestion. By virtue of logic, this hint makes any person unlikely to have committed the crime the most likely candidate. From a Doylist perspective, it is a curious subversion of the “least likely ploy”. Taking into consideration the previously discussed three points that make a culprit, Miss Pinkerton’s clue to the murderer’s identity directly hints at the personality of the person, not necessarily the evidence against them. We could then deduce that the character has an additional role that usually diverts attention away from the figure-type of the murderer – there is a fusion.

The main suspects are all the likely candidates to have committed some of the crimes. Dr Thomas belongs under what could be called the profiteer figure-type (named by Revzin (1978: 386) “the person who has an interest in the murder (usually not the murderer)”: he gains both Dr Humbleby’s practice and his daughter’s hand in marriage after Humbleby dies. Described as a “thoroughly up-to-date man”, Dr Thomas opposed Humbleby’s old-fashioned views of medicine and that created a sharp conflict between them (Christie 2002a: 69). Combined with his straightforward and perceptive personality, the motivations could add up to a calculated murder; however, Luke Fitzwilliam does not see him as the killer due to his strict moral code as a doctor. Major Horton had an extremely domineering wife and would have had the motivation to kill her to gain peace – he is also a profiteer. His conversation with Luke Fitzwilliam indicates that the man had been devoted to his wife, bowing to her every need, but, as Luke pointedly asks himself after their meeting, “was it an exceedingly clever bluff?” (Christie 2002a: 154). Any man driven to a certain point of humiliation could feel the need to eliminate the source of his

distress, especially an Anglo-Indian military man such as Major Horton – this is the logic behind his consideration as a suspect. Tommy Pierce witnessed a sensitive letter in Mr Abbot's office, hence Abbot would have profited from the boy's death as well. Abbot is described by Luke as a "quarrelsome sort of man" who had had disagreements with many people, including Dr Humbleby, another victim (Christie 2002a: 153). Luke expresses his inherent distrust of lawyers as he sees them as dishonest and manipulative and thus he is inclined to consider Mr Abbot a murderer. Mr Ellsworthy, the bohemian young man who is often frowned upon by the villagers and is the seemingly mentally unstable character, is deemed by the investigator to be the most likely person to have been the murderer based on his disposition. As a person who is already involved with occult rituals that include the killing of animals, Luke Fitzwilliam, sensing no apparent connection between all of the different deaths, decides that Ellsworthy has likely committed the crimes in a fit of insanity. Until he is forced to reconsider, Luke is convinced that he is the person he has been looking for.

However, nearing the climax of the story, Lord Whitfield, a man who Luke had not considered a suspect before, confesses to having had a row with each of the victims, claiming that divine providence is naturally eliminating all of his opponents. He is thus the only suspect to actually have a firm motive for killing all the victims. Personality-wise, he is not described as someone who could come up with clever schemes to murder people and get away with it; rather, he is someone short-sighted and obtuse, which invites Luke to believe that Whitfield killed the people in a self-absorbed fervour, in a fit of passion. Using multiple block elements in addition to the "red herring" that narrows the magic circle, like a "false Gestalt" to make readers believe that Lord Whitfield is the murderer because all the evidence indicates so, and false information about what happened between Miss

Waynflete and Lord Whitfield when their engagement was cancelled, Agatha Christie draws all the attention away from the real murderer.

Honorina Waynflete is the character in whom the most figure-types are fused together. At first she is described as a pleasant, intelligent and logical woman – she is the nice old lady figure-type, much like Miss Pinkerton (Revzin's (1978: 386) "a kind old creature (of either sex)"). Since Honorina Waynflete was an employer of Amy Gibbs and Tommy Pierce, was friends with Miss Pinkerton, knows all the people in the village, she is a useful assistant to the investigator. In this aspect she is what could be called a "safe character", someone who is protected by the unspoken norms of classic detective novel structures; as Singer (1984: 167) adds to Revzin's theory of invariant figure-types: certain conventional roles ("of Holmes, Watson, and Lestrade" – i.e. the investigators and their assistants) are expected not to be influenced by the possible fusion of figure-types. The "nice old lady" character of Honorina Waynflete mostly acts in the story like Christie's famous character of Miss Marple and it is assumed that the reader never asks if Miss Marple could be the murderer. Honorina Waynflete seems like the least likely person in the periphery of possible suspects, perhaps excluding only Bridget Conway, only because the readers expect these certain conventional roles to remain unfused. In her character the figure-types of kind old lady, investigator's assistant and murderer are successfully combined, the first two creating the block element: a false impression based on preconceived notions, a contradiction. The apparent opposition of traits, if carefully considered, is not illogical in any way on account of murderers often being skilled actors. The author simply uses the fusion of figure-types to divert the readers' attention away from the true murderer.

The Murder at the Vicarage

The Murder at the Vicarage is Christie's tenth crime novel, published first in 1930. It is Christie's first novel to feature the character of Miss Marple, an old lady from the village of St Mary Mead who solves crimes by observing the human nature and creating parallels between the current situation and a random incident that she has witnessed or heard about. The story is told from the first person narrative point of view by the vicar of St Mary Mead, Leonard Clement, in whose study a murder has taken place. The vicar has made an appointment with Colonel Protheroe to discuss the church accounts but he is called away to a dying man some two miles away and comes later than agreed. Upon his arrival at the vicarage, the vicar finds an agitated Lawrence Redding coming out of the house and, after entering the study, a dead Colonel Protheroe with a bullet through his head. The case seems straightforward enough to the local police after Mr Redding confesses to the crime but things become more complex when Redding's lover and Protheroe's wife Anne also confesses to the murder, implying that the two lovers believe each other to be guilty and are trying to save the other from capital punishment. Thus the police proceed to follow other clues. In addition to the main whodunit storyline, the story also encompasses about three subplots: the true intentions of the archaeologist, Dr Stone, and his assistant Gladys Cram; the mysterious identity of the reclusive Mrs Lestrade; and the disappearing church funds. As customary, the final revelation of the main mystery also provides an answer to the other problems as the threads unravel.

Compared to *Murder Is Easy*, the central conflict of *The Murder at the Vicarage* is much more concise with its "locked room mystery"-like structure (see Penzler 2014: para. 1) and the readers' satisfaction is sure to come from the cleverness of the murder ploy, as opposed to a shock element as was the case with the previous example. The magic circle of

suspects is automatically more limited by virtue of the more limited setting and just one murder.

The figure-type of the investigator is shared by multiple characters: Inspector Slack, the local police officer with unpleasant manners; Colonel Melchett, one of Christie's recurring characters, a chief constable of the county; notably also the vicar, Mr Clement, from whose point of view the story is told and who, from a Doyleist perspective, needs to convey the investigation to the reader and, from a Watsonian perspective, is involved because it had been his house in which the murder had taken place in and, as the vicar, it is his part as an important member of the village community to aid in finding the killer; and last, of course, Miss Marple, Mr Clement's neighbour and a witness whose penchant for noticing the peculiarities of human behaviour leads her to draw her own conclusions on what had happened (her character can also be compared to Honoria Waynflete from *Murder Is Easy* – we can identify a figure-type). The latter two could, of course, simply be classified as the investigator's assistants, though the vicar, as the first person narrator, and Miss Marple, the person who figures out the solution to the mystery, play much more significant roles in the investigation than the police.

The victim of the story is Colonel Protheroe, a local magistrate, disliked by many (similar to *Murder Is Easy's* Lord Whitfield – another figure-type). The suspects are Lawrence Redding, the bohemian young artist (a parallel can be drawn with Mr Ellsworthy) who is living in a studio in the vicarage while he is painting a portrait of the vicar's wife; Anne Protheroe, the victim's young second wife who is having an affair with Mr Redding (her being a young woman married to an older rich man makes her akin to Bridget Conway, who was engaged to Lord Whitfield); Lettice Protheroe, the victim's daughter with his first wife who hates his father; Bill Archer, a poacher who had been repeatedly jailed by the victim; Dr Stone, an archaeologist digging on the victim's land

who is not who he first seems; and Mrs Lestrangle, a mysterious woman who appears to have no alibi.

As mentioned before, Mr Redding and Anne Protheroe both confess to killing Colonel Protheroe right at the start of the investigation. Mr Redding is the first to do so, as he is seen exiting the vicar's house right before the vicar discovers the dead victim; however, his confession does not fit with the evidence – Colonel Protheroe had been killed earlier. Anne Protheroe, upon hearing her lover having confessed to the police, claims that it had been she who had shot her husband and that Mr Redding is simply trying to save her but her confession does not match with the evidence either as she had been seen without the murder weapon earlier by Miss Marple. Both of them are released from custody despite them having very strong motivations to having committed the crime, both belonging to the profiteer figure-type, and the investigators look elsewhere for suspects.

Miss Marple sees Miss Cram, Dr Stone's assistant, carry a suitcase into the woods at night and Mr Clement later discovers the hidden suitcase filled with valuables from Colonel Protheroe's house. Furthermore, Miss Marple's nephew Raymond West claims that the man cannot be Dr Stone, the famous archaeologist, as he has met the real doctor before. This points to the suspicious couple's possible motivations to kill Protheroe if he had discovered the theft – they are also profiteers. Lettice Protheroe's alibi of being at a tennis party is called into question when it is revealed that she had left the party early and, being the victim's daughter and due to inherit a large sum of money, she also had the motivation for the murder. In addition to that, Mrs Lestrangle's mysterious behaviour, her seclusion and lack of alibi also mark her as a suspect. She does not seem to have many defining characteristics during the course of the story, other than being the "mysterious newcomer", though, in the end, she is revealed to be the ex-wife of the victim (which could also be called a figure-type).

Mr Hawes, the church curate guilty of stealing the church funds, calls the vicar, ready to confess. Upon his arrival though, Mr Clement finds Mr Hawes almost dead, which leads him and Inspector Melchett to believe that the curate had been the murderer of Protheroe, who had discovered his theft, and he had now committed suicide because of his guilt. The case seems closed until Miss Marple points to the real murderer.

The three subplots in this novel act as block elements, red herrings that provide excess information that eventually have little to do with the actual murder, and the solution to the whodunit of *The Murder at the Vicarage* is actually a simple case of the most likely suspects being the murderers. Of course, the simplicity of the motives and predisposition is overshadowed by the complexity of the murder ploy itself. The predetermined plan of how Colonel Protheroe was killed was designed to provide the culprits alibis. But this is not the only way Christie ensured that the solution remains a secret until it was revealed in the story by Miss Marple.

Firstly, there had been two culprits, which violates the convention that there had to be only one culprit (see Van Dine's list of twenty rules in Haycraft 1947: 189-195). Singer (1984: 168) illustrates the same type of Christie's systematic breaking of expectations with the example of *Death on the Nile*. Admittedly, there is still only one murderer but the solution to the whodunit could only be unravelled if one took into account that there had been two people that had committed the crime overall: in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe. If we consider the figure-types named by Revzin (1978: 386), then Redding would fall under the "person who planned the murder" figure-type and Anne Protheroe under the "person who committed the murder" figure-type. Despite this distinction, it is clear that one is not simply the "minor helper" or "co-plotter" that Van Dine permits. Rather they are both equally guilty and only by recognizing their mutual part in the ploy can the mystery be solved. Having more than one person commit a

crime in a whodunit novel opens up the possibility to play with alibis (an extreme example is, of course, the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*), as was the case in this story.

Moreover, in addition to having two culprits, Christie also creates a block element by having both of them confess to the crime at the beginning of the story. To the reader, these confessions arguably create a figure-type – the so-called initial confessor. Since the confessing happened specifically immediately after the discovery of the murder, the reader knows that the story must continue and the true culprit cannot be discovered just yet. This Doylist reasoning allows the readers to consider this “initial confessor” figure-type as a “safe character”, much like the investigators and their assistants. The character of Mr Hawes can also be labelled as a confessor but since his confession comes at the end of the story, the reader is more inclined to believe him to be the murderer, adding more weight to Miss Marple’s revelation of the true solution in the dénouement. Like Miss Marple says: “You will remember, dear Mr Clement, that I was quite taken aback when I heard Mr Redding had confessed to the crime. It upset all of my ideas and made me think him innocent – when up to then I had felt convinced that he was guilty.” (Christie 2002b: 355). “Since his [Lawrence Redding’s] innocence is established early in the book, it then becomes possible for Christie to re-establish him as the murderer in the end,” writes Singer (1984: 1969). In fact, the characters that have been proven innocent through the course of a story are generally not accused again. Singer (1984: 168) also claims that “the expectation that ‘characters who are suspected by the police’ are automatically innocent” is a distinct generic blocker. This is what makes the ending of Christie’s famous story *Witness for the Prosecution* particularly striking and what also aids in keeping the mystery of the solution until the end in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. This reasoning is further addressed by Singer (1984: 161, 169), who draws parallels with the novels *Sad Cypress* and *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.

The “initial confessor”/“initially accused” figure-type, as we may label them, fused with the aforementioned “person who planned the murder” and “person who committed the murder” figure-types create a most effective block element that makes the audience look to other possible suspects, despite the actual culprits having especially condemning motives and the general predisposition. This fusion permits the author to use the “most likely ploy”, as named by Merrill (1997: 90) and Xu (2009: 134), rather effectively and, again, Christie demonstrates her awareness of the readers’ expectations – “I know that in books it is always the most unlikely person,” Miss Marple reasons in the story, “But I never find that rule applies in real life.” (Christie 2002b: 356).

Death in the Clouds

Death in the Clouds, first published in 1935, is Agatha Christie’s 17th crime novel. In the US, the book is known under the title *Death in the Air*. The novel stars Christie’s most famous character Hercule Poirot and also features the Scotland Yard Detective Chief Inspector Japp, who often appears together with Poirot. Out of all the three examples in this thesis, *Death in the Clouds* offers the most limited circle of characters as the central crime takes place in a confined space, much like in the novel *Murder on the Orient Express*. Hercule Poirot finds himself amongst ten passengers in a rear cabin of the air liner *Prometheus* on its way from Paris to London’s Croydon airport. During the flight, a wasp is seen flying around the cabin and, later, one of the passengers is found dead with a sting wound in her neck. Poirot is convinced that it is a case of murder when a poison dart is found on the floor by her seat but what makes matters complicated is that no-one has any idea who could have committed the crime in a closed cabin with eleven passengers without anyone having witnessed the act. The presences of the deceiving blowpipe, a cliché in detective fiction since Conan Doyle’s *The Sign of the Four* (see also Anderson 1935: 18),

and the character of Daniel Clancy, an almost hyperbolic detective story writer figure even more extravagant than Christie's recurring character Ariadne Oliver, once again display Christie's awareness of the genre's tropes and her mastery of using them to her advantage in constructing a suspenseful whodunit.

The investigator in this story is, of course, Hercule Poirot, the famous Belgian private detective who takes on the case due to his own involvement as a suspect, trying to clear his name. Poirot is assisted by the French Inspector Fournier and the English Inspector Japp as both countries are involved with the investigation of the murder, though naturally one could also say that Poirot is the assistant to the police; nevertheless, in the story, Poirot remains the more knowledgeable party. The victim on the plane is Madame Giselle, a French moneylender, whose real name is Marie Morisot. The other passengers, who become involved by virtue of simply being on the crime scene, are the initial suspects. There are Jane Grey, a hairdresser who returns from a vacation to Le Pinet in France, the heroine of the story who also helps Hercule Poirot to solve the case – she is an investigator's assistant; Norman Gale, a dentist who had met Miss Grey in Le Pinet and also helps Poirot – another assistant; the aforementioned eccentric crime writer Daniel Clancy; a businessman named James Ryder; a father-son archaeologist duo of Armand and Jean Dupont; Doctor Bryant who suspiciously spends the trip cleaning his flute; the Honourable Venetia Kerr who exchanges her seat with Hercule Poirot to sit next to an acquaintance; and Cicely, the Countess of Horbury, a high-class lady with an unpleasant attitude.

The latter becomes especially suspicious when it is discovered that she had been a client of Madame Giselle's who had loaned money from her without the means of paying back, prompting the victim to threaten the Countess with blackmail material. This revelation fits the Countess firmly into the profiteer figure-type. A special attention in the

story is also given to the parodied detective writer. Mr Clancy's peculiar fixation on murders also marks him as a suspect who could have committed the crime in a passion-fuelled attempt to prove a theory or to enact a scenario that he had created, especially since he does not attempt to hide his gleeful fascination with the death and is also in possession of a blowpipe. One could argue that, from a Doylist perspective, this enthusiasm makes him unlikely to have committed the crime since usually a whodunit novel requires a certain layer of deception to gain a point of interest that would be lost if the culprit were presented in such an obvious manner. Nevertheless, a slight similarity can be detected with Mr Ellsworthy's figure-type in *Murder Is Easy*.

In a curious move, Poirot himself is also a suspect in the case as the blowpipe that was suspected to have been used to blow the dart that had been found next to Madame Giselle's body is discovered pushed behind his seat. The reader, together with Inspector Japp, is promptly encouraged to dismiss this as a deceptive manoeuvre by the actual killer since Hercule Poirot, on the grounds of being the famous Hercule Poirot, cannot have committed the murder (this logic is used to create the critical block element in the novel *Curtain* that stops the reader from immediately realizing that Poirot had indeed been the murderer). "He seems, according to the coroner's jury, to be the most likely person, so that washes him out," argues the character of Norman Gale (Christie 2007: 64).

Poirot conscripts Jane Grey and Norman Gale, who had become acquaintances during the ordeal, as his assistants in this case. Jane Grey is described as a pleasant young woman, similar in her figure-type to, for example, Bridget Conway from *Murder is Easy* and the vicar's wife Griselda in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Since the story is largely told from her point of view, though not exclusively since it is not a first person narration and the plot does require Poirot's perspective, and Jane did not appear to have moved from her seat at all during the flight, she is presented as a "safe character". Jane met Norman Gale

during her time spent in Le Pinet where the young handsome dentist kindly gave up his own winnings at a gambling table for the woman. It is obvious that Norman Gale is charmed by Jane and Jane feels flattered by his attention – they are potential love interests and they echo the dynamic of Luke Fitzwilliam and Bridget Conway in a subtle way. Gale is mostly present in Jane’s company during the story as they dine together or discuss the case and hence, through the storytelling, Christie instils into the readers some form of trust in Norman Gale as the duo becomes involved in the investigation. As Poirot has decided to trust the pair, the reader is also inclined to do so.

Later in the story, it is revealed that Madame Giselle had an heir – an estranged daughter Anne Morisot. She had been on board of the *Prometheus* as Countess of Horbury’s maid. This twist creates a moment of recognition in the reader since previously in the story the maid had remained unmentioned even though the attentive reader noticed her presence at the beginning of the story when the entire plane ride had been described. This method of misdirection is similar to the one Christie used in *Murder Is Easy* when making all the suspects men; in this case, the audience is encouraged to not think about the presence of the stewards and the maid who had been in the cabin in addition to the passengers, even though the reader already knows about their existence – the author simply does not mention them as possible suspects. In a way, the stewards and maids are the epitome of the typical “least likely suspect”, much like carriage drivers, butlers or gardeners. These are the characters that can move around unnoticed. This trope is a cliché, yet effective, since the reader does not usually pay attention to the characters that they have not been told to pay attention to. Due to the block element of not enough information, Anne Morisot is able to avoid detection until Poirot recognizes her. As a profiteer figure-type, she becomes the main suspect until she herself is murdered, making her the second victim.

The final revelation of the solution unveils that Anne Morisot had been married to Norman Gale who orchestrated the whole affair to inherit the money his wife would receive after her mother's death. Norman Gale turns out to be the murderer and we see another case of the figure-types of "investigator's assistant" and "murderer" combined. Where Honoria Waynflete had been a "kind old lady" figure-type, then Norman Gale embodies a form of "young male love interest" figure-type that often gains sympathy from the audience who roots for the well-being of the heroine (even called "a sympathetic but weak young creature" in Revzin's (1978: 386) analysis). The satisfaction of the ending comes from both the shocking discovery of the murderer's identity (as in *Murder is Easy*) and the intricacy of the murder ploy (as in *The Murder at the Vicarage*) that uses the previously mentioned "least likely person ploy" to its advantage by having Gale dress up as a steward. In order for the satisfaction to come from both directions, Norman Gale's character has to be a two-faced actor that hides his cunning and calculative coldness under a mask of a friendly and kind young man. Changing a character's defining characteristics, like turning a potential love interest into a deceitful profiteer, can be tricky as it can seem like too big of a turnaround to be believable. Christie has taken this factor into consideration and hints at the man's deceiving personality by having Poirot assign him a task during the investigation that requires Gale to prove his acting skills. Without this kind of a manoeuvre, it would have been more difficult to convince the reader of the suitability of the culprit since, as mentioned before, the writer needs to assure the reader that the solution that they have offered is the most fitting to all the previously established evidence.

Because of these considerations, *Death in the Clouds* could be said to have the most complicated block element of fused figure-types in all the three novels that have been brought as examples in this thesis: Norman Gale is an investigator's assistant, the love interest but also a secret profiteer and the murderer – a layered character whose deception

requires much attention on the plot level of the story. The success of this block element can clearly be seen in the story's laudatory reception that also highlights Christie's skill of writing a murder mystery that takes place in a confined space (see, for example, *The Times* 1935: 8). Her intimate knowledge of the genre's conventions and the readers' perspective come together to form a novel where much attention is given to the finer details of different block elements. Again, it would be greatly oversimplified to say that we are dealing merely with the "least likely person ploy", a term preferred by, for example, Haycraft (2019: 132), since the reasoning, methodology and the complicated block elements that go behind the creation of the culprit Norman Gale are not simply equitable with just choosing a character who would appear the least likely to have committed the crime – a criticism also voiced by Singer (1984: 159) and Merrill (1997: 92).

Discussion

Looking at the three novels, *Murder Is Easy*, *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *Death in the Clouds*, it can be easily observed that the first and the last share a common possibility of being seen as having used the "least likely person ploy" to create their solutions. However, since a similar pattern of misdirection that was used in the two stories can be detected in novels like *The Murder at the Vicarage*, which can rather be described to use the "most likely person ploy", we can see that the reasoning behind the creation of certain solutions in whodunits cannot just be classified through simplified concepts such as the "least likely ploy". Instead, we should strive to understand the more complicated logic of the creation of block elements, as was demonstrated with the theory of the fusion of invariant figure-types.

It is obvious that due to the conventionality of the crime genre, especially the deep-rooted rules of detective novels and whodunits specifically, we can detect similar character

roles across different stories. These traditional figure-types have become very much ingrained into our understanding of crime story structures since the characters there are rarely developed beyond the basic two-dimensional figure-type (usually with the exception of the detective) as the author needs to spread the attention equally among the cast of characters not to reveal the true culprit prematurely. It is then only a matter of choosing the right method of diversion that can use the invariant figure-types for the benefit of distracting the reader and creating block elements.

In general, it is possible to find similar figure-types in the stories without difficulty if one has multiple novels for comparison. The suspects are usually profiteers, there are investigators and their assistants, we can see young women in relationships with older men, old ladies in small villages, egoistic and disliked men of power, young love interests, even seemingly mentally unstable characters. The fusion of invariant figure-types usually appears in the case of the murderers and the revelation of the fusion reflects the transition from a more two-dimensional personality to a more fully-fleshed character to give more satisfaction to the reader.

In *Murder Is Easy*, the fusion of the “kind old lady” and the “investigator’s assistant” creates the block element that stops the reader from figuring out that Honoria Waynflete is also the “murderer” figure-type. The reader’s pre-existing associations with the first two invariant figure-types create the image of a “safe character” that stops the audience from considering Waynflete as a suspect in the first place. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, we see the characters of Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe with the “initial confessor”/“initially accused” figure-type being the murderers. The conventional opposition of these two types – that readers usually ignore the characters who have already confessed or who have already been accused at the beginning of the story as potential suspects – creates the block element. *Death in the Clouds* features a murderer that fuses the

figure-types of “investigator’s assistant” and “young male love interest” in Norman Gale, creating the appearance of a “safe character” through the fusion, similarly to *Murder Is Easy*.

Though the results of using this method of fusing invariant figure-types share many similarities, they are also significantly different from one another, enough not to make the ploy become overly obvious. This is due to the fact that crime fiction readers often prefer applying a Doyleist perspective to their reading. Rather than relying solely on a Watsonian reading of the whodunit and following the clues and developments of the case together with the investigator on the story level, the audience frequently tries to figure out the solution also on the structural level of the whodunit, trying to find patterns of ploys by the author. The fusion of invariant figure-types is therefore a versatile and reliable method of creating block elements as there are a considerable number of different character roles that could be utilized in a detective novel, which allows for substantial variations in using the method. Finding a balance between the Watsonian and Doyleist perspectives requires the author’s deep understanding of detective fiction’s conventions, which Agatha Christie demonstrates over and over again by inserting parodies and quips about different clichés and ploys into her stories.

CONCLUSION

The main goal of this thesis was to prove how Agatha Christie uses the fusion of invariant figure-types to create block elements that stop the readers from immediately figuring out the solution of the crimes. For achieving that purpose, the first chapter lays a groundwork of theory and, focusing on the works of Christie specifically, concentrates on the conventionality of the detective fiction genre, the rules that form its structures, the ploys and schemas that rise from these restrictions and how these regulations help create

the necessary satisfaction for the readers. We can see that these limitations play an important role as they establish the fundamental basis on which to build a detective story. When discussing a standard ploy such as the “least likely person ploy”, the importance of the characters of the novels becomes apparent. To describe the characters’ positions and roles in the story and see how these roles recur in different novels, it is appropriate to apply Revzin’s theory of invariant figure-types. Combining the theory of the fusion of figure-types with the concept of block elements helps us further understand one of Christie’s methods of misdirection.

In the empirical study of the second chapter, three of Christie’s novels – *Murder Is Easy*, *The Murder at the Vicarage* and *Death in the Clouds* – were analysed, particularly the characters of the stories and their roles in the plot, with special attention being paid to the culprits. To demonstrate the theory of the fusion of invariant figure-types, the characters of the novels were assigned figure-types based on their characteristics. The fusions that created the block elements in the stories and the reasoning behind their creation were discussed. As a result, we can observe patterns of similar figure-types across the three novels, the multi-layered fusions of figure-types occurring in the case of the culprits of the novels’ central mysteries. These fusions of the “murderer” figure-type and the so-called “safe character” figure-types (“kind old lady”, “investigator’s assistant”, “initial confessor/initially accused”, “love interest”) allow Christie to create a false sense of security in the reader, potentially making them discard the actual culprits as potential suspects.

This block element of contradiction in character falls under one of the four types of block elements that can be used to create misdirections which stop the readers from prematurely predicting the ending of the detective novels. Due to its versatility and unpredictability, the fusion of invariant figure-types is an effective writing strategy and,

though the prominent examples of its application (*And Then There Were None* and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*) use this ploy as a means to create shocking solutions, it effectively features in its subtler forms in more novels than one might assume at first glance. It is thus important to consider it as a distinguishable ploy in creating whodunits and pay closer attention to the logic that goes behind the creation of these types of ploys; not to reduce the complexity of Christie's methodology to a simplistic idea of the "least likely person ploy", as is often done, but to recognize the careful balance that needs to be maintained in order to provide both a satisfying, coherent and plausible solution to the central mystery of the detective novel and keep the solution a secret during the course of the story at the same time.

The method of fusing figure-types is used by Christie to toy with the readers' generic expectations of detective fiction's conventionality and to create confusing block elements that stop the readers from immediately figuring out the ending of her novels. To use the genre's conventions to write satisfactory solutions to the detective novels means to use the readers' tendency to confuse expectations with norms to test the limits of these generic expectations. It is not necessarily the least likely character that has committed the crime in the stories, as the "least likely person ploy" suggests, but rather the author hides the murderer in plain sight, using simple methods of diversion.

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RESÜMEE

TARTU ÜLIKOOL
ANGLISTIKA OSAKOND

Ave Palm

The Fusion of Invariant Figure-Types as Block Elements in Agatha Christie's Works Muutumate tegelastüüpide fusioon blokkelementidena Agatha Christie teostes

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Annotatsioon:

Bakalaureusetöö eesmärk on analüüsida ühte Agatha Christie detektiivromaanides kasutatavat blokkelementide loomise võtet, millega autor takistab lugejal teose lõpplahendust ära arvamast. Võtteks on muutumate tegelastüüpide fusioon. Lisaks sissejuhatusle ja kokkuvõttele, on töö veel jagatud kaheks suuremaks osaks: olemasoleva kirjanduse ülevaade, kus selgitatakse detektiivromaanidele omapäraseid tunnuseid ja vormistandardeid, Christie'le tavapäraseid meetodeid ning kombineeritakse muutumate tegelastüüpide fusiooni käsitlus blokkelementide teooriaga; ja analüüsiosa, kus vaadeldakse kolme Christie krimiromaan – „Kerge on tappa“ (*Murder Is Easy*), „Mõrv kiriklas“ (*The Murder at the Vicarage*) ja „Surm pilvede kohal“ (*Death in the Clouds*) – ja nendes olevaid tegelasi, eriti mõrvari tegelaskuju, et näha, kuidas muutumate tegelastüüpide fusioon aitab mõrvari identiteeti teose käigus varjata. Analüüsi tulemusena võib välja tuua, et romaanis „Kerge on tappa“ on „mõrvari“ tegelastüüp peidetud „lahke vana naise“ ja „uurija abilise“ tegelastüüpide fusiooni kaudu; romaanis „Mõrv kiriklas“ on „mõrvari“ tegelastüüp kokku pandud „esialgse ülestunnistaja“/„esialgselt süüdistatu“ tegelastüübiga, mis takistab lugejal süüdlasi kahtlustamast; ning romaanis „Surm pilvede kohal“ kuulub mõrvar ka „noore armastaja“ ja „uurija abilise“ tegelastüüpide alla. Nendest tulemustest saab järeldada, et Agatha Christie romaanide lahenduskäigud ja blokkelemendid on hästi läbimõeldud strateegiate tulem ning neid ei peaks lihtsustama kui pelgalt „vähim tõenäolisema tegelase võte“.

Märksõnad: inglise kirjandus, krimikirjandus, detektiivkirjandus, Agatha Christie, tegelastüübid

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[pp.kk.aaaa]