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Département d'Études Anglophones

Master 2 Mention Langues, Littératures et Civilisations Étrangères et Régionales

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La question de la clôture dans les romans d'Agatha Christie | Enclosure in Agatha Christie's works

Mémoire présenté en vue de l'obtention du grade de Master soutenu par

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Better to have one thousand enemies outside the house than to have one
single enemy inside it.

Lebanese Proverb¹

Evil is unspectacular and always human,
And shares our bed and eats at our own table.

W.H. Auden, "Herman Melville"²

¹ "Lebanese Proverbs," Quotespedia, n.d. <https://www.quotespedia.org/quotes/authors/l/lebanese-proverbs/>

² Auden, W.H. 1945. "Herman Melville," in *The Collected Poetry of W.H. Auden* (New York: Random House), pp. 146-7

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List of abbreviated titles

Abbreviation	Meaning
<i>Ackroyd</i>	<i>The Murder of Roger Ackroyd</i>
<i>Announced</i>	<i>A Murder is Announced</i>
<i>Appointment</i>	<i>Appointment with Death</i>
<i>Cards</i>	<i>Cards on the Table</i>
<i>Chambre jaune</i>	<i>Le Mystère de la chambre jaune</i>
<i>Christmas</i>	<i>Hercule Poirot's Christmas</i>
<i>Clouds</i>	<i>Death in the Clouds</i>
<i>Curtain</i>	<i>Curtain: Poirot's Last Case</i>
<i>Evil</i>	<i>Evil under the Sun</i>
<i>Hickory</i>	<i>Hickory Dickory Death</i>
<i>Mesopotamia</i>	<i>Murder in Mesopotamia</i>
<i>Mirrors</i>	<i>They Do It with Mirrors</i>
<i>Nile</i>	<i>Death on the Nile</i>
<i>None</i>	<i>And Then There Were None</i>
<i>Ordeal</i>	<i>Ordeal by Innocence</i>
<i>Orient Express</i>	<i>Murder on the Orient Express</i>
<i>Parfum</i>	<i>Le Parfum de la dame en noir</i>
<i>“Rue Morgue”</i>	<i>“Murders in the Rue Morgue”</i>
<i>Styles</i>	<i>The Mysterious Affair at Styles</i>
<i>Tragedy</i>	<i>Three Act Tragedy</i>

Introduction

Any avid reader of Agatha Christie's detective fiction would probably agree that the years 2020 and 2021 would give Christie the perfect premise for one of her books. Had Christie lived through regular confinements and been willing to write about it, it is easy to picture what Poirot's next case might have looked like. The novel would open, perhaps, on a seemingly respectable English family, sharing their country mansion in harmony – until they get locked down together for weeks, denied the usual reprieve a tea party, the local village fair, or a visit to a friend would provide. The distance from society, the cramped conditions, and the psychological repercussions of feeling imprisoned would slowly plunge this family into chaos. Tensions and conflicts would arise as each character would get on the others' nerves; a particularly domineering personality might emerge among the family and turn their lives into a nightmare. The situation would culminate into a murder that a very bored, hygiene-obsessed Hercule Poirot would have to solve. Only two things would be known for sure: no one but the family was within the locked house at the time of the murder, and every single of one of them could have committed it.

This scenario looks familiar, and with good reason: Christie's detective fiction is mostly set in quarantine-like situations. Indeed, the majority of her detective fiction depicts a murder committed in a locked down setting inhabited only by a restricted circle of characters, all of which are usually subjected to extreme tension until the character responsible for the anxiety-inducing atmosphere is murdered. While there may be some variation in the specifics, the synopsis above could summarise most of Agatha Christie's detective novels. Her most famous, often-adapted novels – such as *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, or *And Then There Were None* – all follow this formula, with some alterations. Upon counting, one may discover that thirty-four novels out of sixty (excluding Christie's spy fiction) are located in a closed setting – more than half, a number that goes higher if one accounts for the plays, short stories and novellas.

It would be wrong, however, to assume that simply because Christie favoured one formula all of her novels tackle the same issues or present no interesting variation. On the contrary, her using this generic synopsis over and over again indicates her willingness to explore all of its potentialities. While the country house setting is a favourite – one may mention *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and its counterpart *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case*, *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, “Dead Man's Mirror” and so many more –, Christie was also partial to murders committed on various means of transportation (*Murder on*

the Orient Express, Death in the Clouds, Death on the Nile), in single rooms or around a restaurant table (*Three Act Tragedy, Cards on the Table, Sparkling Cyanide*). A few novels even depict murders committed out in the open (*Appointment with Death*), in a student hostel or a dentist's practice (*Hickory Dickory Death; One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*), or on islands (*And Then There Were None, Evil Under the Sun*). The action may take place in the countryside or in the city (*Crooked House*), in England or in the Orient (*Orient Express, Murder in Mesopotamia*, and a few others), it may be investigated right away or twenty years later (*Five Little Pigs*). The group of characters may be a family (*Hercule Poirot's Christmas*), a group of friends or colleagues (*Mesopotamia*), or strangers to one another (None); the culprit may turn out to be a supposedly dead character (None), the whole group of suspects (*Orient Express*), the policeman (*Christmas*), the narrator (*Ackroyd*), or the detective (*Curtain*). Emphasis may be laid on the characters' horrendous abuse at the hands of the victim (*Appointment with Death*), on the complex relationships of love and hate between spouses, divorcees, and mistresses (*Towards Zero, Death on the Nile, The Hollow*), on the manner in which a toxic family environment may turn a child into a murderer (*Crooked House*). Confinement itself is also given particular attention; *And Then There Were None*, for instance, emphasises the claustrophobic atmosphere created by a complete isolation from outside while horror goes down inside.

It is in the specifics and in the variations she spun on that broad synopsis that Christie's formula of enclosure becomes more than a mere generic outline. Enclosure is much more than than a mere constant in her works, it is fundamental. Two critics go as far as to say that Christie's detective fiction is, essentially, a literature of imprisonment:

[...] because of the focus on interiors and interiority, her novels, which have been branded as "escapist", seem on the face of it to represent rather the opposite, a sort of 'captivism'. Not so much a literature of escape but one of captivity. One which thrills readers with literary fantasies of captivity. What captivates us here is the very dysfunctional society of very strange characters stuck together for the duration of the novels. [...] So as a "Captivist" literature, Agatha Christie's novels seem to be very apt confinement literature, addressing [...] the perils of this unnatural proximity to other people [...]. (Beck and Jeannerod, "Agatha Christie: One hundred years of confinement")

It is precisely because I agree with this statement that I was surprised to find so very little academic analysis about Christie's extensive use of enclosure in her novels. Christie's literature presents a unique brand of enclosure, one that is associated with mystery, guilt, and suspicion, but also with the excitement of the enigma and the promise of a solution that will restore order at the end; this confinement, in short, is a paradox. Yet, prominent Christie critics (such as Earl Bargainnier or Debora Sarnelli) and famous commentators of the genre

(like Robert Champigny or Jacques Dubois) only make passing comments on it, meaning that the various subtleties of Christie's formula of enclosure remain barely brushed upon, even though it is generally agreed upon that one cannot understand Christie's fiction – or detective fiction in general – without understanding this enclosure first.

Indeed, Christie is widely recognised as the most prominent writer and main representative of the 'classical' detective subgenre, a branch of detective fiction that thrived between the Two World Wars (an era otherwise known as the Golden Age of Detective Fiction). In fact, since Christie wrote from 1920 (date when her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, was published in the United States) until her death in 1976, she even outlasted the success of the genre. Throughout that period, detective fiction was divided into various branches. There was, on the one hand, the American hard boiled novel, in which the detective moved from place to place in his pursuit of the criminal and his exploration of all social spheres to expose socio-political issues (Reuter 2017, 78). The British school, on the other hand, was a stark opposite.

In his book *Le Roman policier*, Yves Reuter stated that the whodunnit (i.e. a detective story driven by the puzzle element, and the most classic variation of detective fiction) is a subgenre characterised by a closed narrative universe. Reuter identifies three types of enclosure within the genre: spatial enclosure, which confines the mystery within the boundaries of one geographical setting only; temporal enclosure, which limits the story to a short window of time corresponding strictly to the crime and the detective's investigation; and social enclosure, which guarantees not only that social classes do not intermingle but also that the mystery be restricted to a fixed number of characters (Reuter 2017, 60). This enclosure has a strictly functional role: by grounding the story in such a limited narrative frame, authors ensure that the story focuses on the mystery only, without distractions – unity of space, of time and of social class ensure unity of action, to speak in Aristotelian terms.

Reuter's analysis underlines that enclosure is constitutive of the whodunnit, but also that it is multidimensional. This information is particularly relevant to the case of Agatha Christie, for she was not one whodunnit writer among many. Her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (starring the famous Hercule Poirot) is considered a milestone for the genre. Not only was *Styles* the novel that started the Golden Age (Cook 2011, 87) but it also set the conventions of the classic whodunnit that many writers imitated. Most notably, it was *Styles* that set the trend of using enclosed settings in whodunnits – a technique otherwise known in the genre as the closed circle of suspects.

Anthony Berkeley, a fellow Golden Age crime writer and Christie imitator, was the first to define this technique, a few years after Christie popularised it:

'I have always thought that murders may be divided into two classes, closed or open. By a closed murder I mean one committed in a certain closed circle of persons, such as a house-party, in which it is known that the murderer is limited to membership of that actual group. This is by far the commoner form in fiction. An open murder I call one in which the criminal is not limited to any particular group but might be almost anyone in the world. This, of course, is almost invariably what happens in real life.' (Berkeley 1929, 159; emphasis mine)

This quote illustrates that enclosure, in Christie's works, entails more than merely locating the story within a confined setting. Christie's 'captive' literature is to be distinguished from a mere partiality for locked settings, because the closed circle of suspects entails not simply a specific treatment of space; it also entails a specific treatment of the group of suspects. This treatment would be radically different from Christie's second-best (albeit lesser used) formula, traditionally associated with Miss Marple: that of the murder committed in a village. In such stories, the detective must try and identify the characters who, amidst the entire village, had an interest in the victim's death. In the closed circle of suspects, however, a small, clearly delineated, and unquestionable number of suspects is identified from the start. *Because the setting of the crime is restricted, the murderer can only be found inside.* In other words,

Commonly dubbed the "country house" mystery, the more traditional of these stories treat a relatively closed circle of suspects [and] take place in a fairly limited setting [...]. Because these settings are limited in both size and social accessibility, they [...] circumscribe the investigation (the killer must be one of the inner circle in almost every case) and enable the detective to function [...]. (Bakerman 1987, 119)

Bakerman's quote is particularly interesting because it highlights the complementary relationship between physical enclosure and social enclosure, i.e. between the confined setting and the delimited community of suspects. It is because the setting is closed, constrained, isolated and impenetrable, that a community of suspects just as closed, restricted, isolated and impenetrable is delimited. In the closed circle detective story, spatial enclosure and social enclosure thus work together – a combination that temporal enclosure sometimes completes, when the mystery is set within a particular window of time.

Christie's treatment of this double enclosure, as a determining factor of the enigma, is thus the key to understanding the complex mechanisms at play in Christie's classical whodunnits – from the structure of the mystery at hand to the atmosphere and the social dimension of Christie's narratives. The question that arises, then, may be summarised in a few words: How are spatial enclosure and social enclosure articulated in complementary fashion within

Christie's detective stories and how does this double enclosure affect the narrative? It is this double enclosure that this *mémoire* proposes to examine in detail, in order to provide an answer to the many questions this complex dynamic entails: where does this closed circle ploy stem from, and what reasons motivated Christie to employ it time and again? How does that choice impact the narrative and the reading experience? How do settings and groups of suspects work together, and what roles do topography, geography and isolation play in that regard? How do the characteristics of the closed space impact the groups of suspects and the clues, secrets and red herrings associated with them, especially as regards fear and suspicion? What can this social organisation reveal about the society Christie lived in and chose to represent?

In order to answer these questions, I have chosen a corpus of six novels to analyse – without excluding references to the rest of Christie's vast body of work when relevant. These novels each illustrate different facets of Christie's closed circle ploy. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) shows her first writing of the ploy, thus allowing comparison with later novels to study how Christie adapted the circle device throughout the years. This novel also dwells on the public's opinion and suspicions about the murder and its suspects. *Murder on the Orient Express*, written in 1934, is one of Christie's most famous in-transit stories, in addition to its being located in a foreign and isolated setting. It is especially interesting for its unique mixing of social classes and its original solution that reveals that the suspects work together instead of suspecting each other. *Murder in Mesopotamia*, a slightly less famous Christie novel written in 1936, is one of Christie's most interesting studies on atmosphere: in addition to featuring a particularly well-described enclosed setting in the Orient, the novel analyses in detail the tensions that lade the group of suspects until they lead to murder. *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* is a classic country house mystery written in 1938, at the apotheosis of the Golden Age. This novel features one of Christie's rare locked room murders, but it also presents the reader with family tensions, a tyrannical victim everyone wanted to rid themselves of, a murder committed for revenge, and a policeman found guilty. *And Then There Were None*, a 1939 classic and best-seller, is the culmination of the closed circle ploy: not only are all characters sequestered on an isolated island, without a detective, but they all suspect each other – as they are all killers – and become mad with the certainty that their murderer is one of them. Finally, *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* is a complement to *Styles*: written during the Second World War, Christie intended it to be the very last Poirot novel and published at the end of her life, in 1975. Situated in the same country house, but decades later, this novel

presents the specific case of strangers living together and being tempted into murder by a sadistic individual who is capable of pinpointing people's weaknesses and darkest desires.

As regards the structure of my work, my analysis of Christie's uses of enclosure will be divided into three parts that, hopefully, will shed some light on the questions raised above.

Chapter One will aim to identify where Christie's closed circle of suspects originated from, what the incentive was for Christie to use this device extensively, and what changes she brought to existing patterns. Even though Christie was the one who set the closed circle trend during the Golden Age, one should not forget that Christie was the literary descendent of other, influential mystery writers who shaped the genre into the classic formula she came to know, adopt and refine. This first part will thus analyse the uses and evolutions of settings, spatial enclosure and social enclosure in the works of Christie's predecessors in order to pinpoint the literary foundations of Christie's closed circle ploy, but also to determine what pre-existing elements Christie adopted, adapted or rejected to create it.

The next part of this *mémoire* will focus extensively on spatial enclosure and more *specifically* the interactions between the setting and the community of suspects. The purpose of this part will be to understand how the author accomplishes the physical delineation of a group of suspects and what consequences it has on the mystery that is told and the reading experience. This second chapter will thus study the depiction, organisation, and various uses of enclosed settings in Christie's novels as related to the enclosed group, the mystery under investigation, and the impact on the narrative. Specific attention will be paid to the nature of such an enclosure and particularly to the boundary that severs the fictional setting from the outside, including the artificiality it may generate for the reader and the issue of social isolation it entails for the characters.

It is this social problem that the third and final chapter of this *mémoire* will analyse. Since spatial enclosure is inseparable from social enclosure, it is necessary to study the enclosed group of suspects as well as the consequences of such a confinement. This third part will thus analyse the interpersonal relationship between the fictional characters and the anxiety that comes from the presence of a murderer within the tight-knit group. This part will pay close attention to the web of suspicions that Christie weaves within the fictional circle, and the consequences of such suspicion on the (admittedly already shaken) social order. If this chapter will analyse Christie's novels from a psychoanalytical standpoint, it will also examine them from a social perspective, notably by questioning the possibility of a return to social harmony.

Chapter One: Agatha Christie's influences

Even though Agatha Christie is usually credited with inventing the closed circle of suspects motif that became recurrent in detective fiction (Anderson 2007, 24), one should not forget that Christie is the literary descendent and contemporary of a series of detective fiction authors that inspired her. These authors all had a hand in shaping the formula of detective fiction into the classical format Christie came to know, adopt and refine. This means that in order to understand the originality of the process of double enclosure in her novels, where it stemmed from and how it reshaped detective fiction, one must first study the generic evolution of the genre and compare her novels with other detective novels that came before.

The first author that will be considered in this chapter is Edgar Allan Poe, the creator of the detective genre. Not only did he establish the generic rules of the genre that Christie's works follow, but his tales of ratiocination combine the locked room mystery with the claustrophobia and terror of his Gothic stories, suggesting an early association of enclosure and fear within the genre. A second part will address Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. Doyle mostly focused on urban space, but his depiction of crime as universal and the multiple functions of space in his stories were essential to Christie, while his interest in isolated countryside families and in private spheres were a first step towards Christie's signature closed circle. In turn, Gaston Leroux's novels set forth a first version of the closed circle of suspects that Christie would later improve: he enclosed and isolated his characters like Christie would do after him, resulting in a similar atmosphere of paranoia and suspicion, albeit in a more sensationalist dimension. Christie, on the other hand, followed through the Golden Age principles of fair play and logical puzzles. As the fourth part will demonstrate, the rules set for detective fiction during the Golden Age incited Christie to employ the closed circle of suspects, in which she was aided by contemporary writer John Dickson Carr: both Christie and Carr developed new variations on enclosure in their works.

1.1. Edgar Allan Poe's legacy

1.1.1. The creation of the genre and its codes

Edgar Allan Poe is considered the inventor of the detective fiction genre by virtue of his writing several short stories featuring his detective Chevalier Auguste Dupin – “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Rogêt” (1842-3) and “The Purloined Letter” (1845), to which critics sometimes add “The Gold Bug” (1843) for its featuring a cryptogram to solve and “Thou Art the Man” (1844) for its murder, process of detection and unexpected culprit (Knight 2004, 26). Although detective fiction did not become popular until Conan Doyle wrote his first Sherlock Holmes stories in the late nineteenth century, Poe nevertheless created the basic formula for detective fiction that countless writers were to follow (Cawelti 1976, 8).

Although Agatha Christie did not explicitly mention Poe as one of her sources of inspiration, there is no denying that the classical pattern she used in her novels and short stories originated in Poe's short stories. Both Cook and Cawelti identified the narrative structure of Poe's stories – an enclosed sequence leading the reader from the introduction of the crime and clues to the eventual solution and denouement – as the prototype that subsequent detective fiction writers imitated (Cawelti 1976, 82; Cook 2011, 7). Curran listed a number of motifs that Poe introduced and Christie re-used, including “the brilliant amateur detective” and “the less-than-brilliant narrator-friend,” “the trail of false clues” and “the unexpected solution” (Curran 2011, 35). A number of similar literary legacies could be mentioned – like the view of the investigation as a game or the importance of “intelligent reading” (Cook 2011, 11) – but two motifs in particular are relevant to Christie's use of space. The first one is “the parade of witnesses, suspects, and possible solutions” mentioned by Cawelti in *Adventure, Romance and Mystery* (Cawelti 1976, 86): the necessity of this array of characters eventually led Christie to gather and ground all the suspects in the same space, at the same time. The second motif is that of the sealed room (Curran 2011, 35), featured in “Rue Morgue”.

As Donald Yates analysed it in “An Essay on Locked Rooms,” Poe chose this ploy because it “[made] the purest appeal to logic for its solution” (Yates 1970, 273). “Rue Morgue” and the following Dupin stories were intended not as the foundation of a new genre focused on crime-solving, but rather as a demonstration on the power of analysis – “that moral activity which *disentangles*,” as Poe wrote in his introduction to “Rue Morgue” (Poe 1988, 61). The

paradox of a hermetically closed space that was broken into perfectly fitted the needs of a story that aimed to “disentangle” an impossible problem:

The locked-room mystery is a problem of comparison – how to discover a passage between inside and outside, how to acknowledge and explain the fact that both inside and outside are places within the same universe, though they afford perspectives of that universe as different as the killer’s and the victim’s. (Madoff 1989, 50)

For this reason, Poe designed his Dupin stories (and by extension the classic detective story which shaped itself following the structures of these stories) as what Cook called “a genre of the *intérieure*, where the narrative inevitably turns inward to consider the clues arising from a world limited by the confines of closed dwellings and limited numbers of characters” (Cook 2011, 51) – a definition that applies to Christie as well. In “Rue Morgue” the only clues Dupin and the reader need to solve the mystery are restricted to the sealed room. The razor “besmeared with blood,” the “thick tresses of grey human hair, also dabbled in blood” and the hideously disfigured body of Camille L’Espanaye are all the indications Dupin needs to solve the mystery and are all found in the locked room (Poe 1988, 70-71). It is also the meticulous study of the topology of the victims’ apartment – both the position of the rooms and the analysis of the windows – that enables Dupin to understand how the murderer came in and out. By confining both the mystery and the narrative into this enclosed setting, Poe ensured that his story and his narrative were self-contained. This precaution was necessary not only to allow the presence of clues but also to limit the number of characters and potential suspects. Without this enclosure, the murderer – once his/her identity is revealed – would be little less than a *deus ex machina* – unwelcome in a short story focused on the capacities of the analytical mind – for no clues would lead to him/her, who could be about any character. The closed room from “Rue Morgue” prevents this infinity of solutions (most of which would be unsatisfying to the reader – who would be happy to learn that the puzzling murder was committed by a nobody?³) while still entertaining mystery. During the Golden Age of detective fiction, this necessity for a limited, known number of characters and clues would become one of the essential rules to writing detective stories, and would in turn lead Agatha Christie to use spatial enclosure as a method to ensure the presence of an entertaining number of suspects (see Part 4.1.).

Nevertheless, the Dupin short stories do not provide the reader with a plethora of suspects – although “Rue Morgue” features quite a number of witnesses, whose testimonies are central to the resolution of the double murder. The extensive analysis of the characters’ household

³Although, note-worthily, the resolution of “Rue Morgue” (i.e., a previously unmentioned orang-utan is the murderer) arose its fair share of criticism for this very reason. See Julian Symons, *Bloody Murder*, pp. 35-37.

reveals some biographical information about them; for instance, the description of the L'Españayes' apartment gives away some details about their lives: "The shutters of the front windows were seldom opened. Those in the rear were always closed" (Poe 1988, 72). However, this information only aims at furthering the mystery of the locked room ploy – what type of lives did the L'Españayes live? If they never received anyone, who could have wanted to murder them?

Conversely, Agatha Christie's novels – to a certain extent – focus more on the characters, their mobiles, alibis and lies, than on the architecture of the locked room or enclosed space which, although relevant, never reveals the entire truth. For example, *And Then There Were None* does not provide a map of the island or a detailed description of the house and neither does *Hercule Poirot's Christmas* in spite of its being one of Christie's rare locked room mysteries. Because Christie entraps all characters in the same physical space, Poe's initial question – "how did the murderer enter the room?" – shifts to "who" – "which one of us is it?" (Christie 2011, 175). The question "how?" – "how did they do it before our own eyes?" – is but an invitation to examine where the characters were, where they were not, and what they were doing. For this reason, in *Christmas* Christie's locked room itself is contained within the confines of a family house, thus restricting the cast of characters, and focusing the story both on the clues found in the room and on the characters' actions – their comings and goings, their relationships, their behaviour. For example, the clues found in the room reveal *how* the murder was committed but the identity of the murderer is betrayed by Simeon Lee's sexual past, the timing of the events and Superintendent Sugden's behaviour. Following this pattern, if several of Christie's murders occur in a specific room – as is the case in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* or *Murder on the Orient Express* – the room displays the physical clues, but the much larger physical space it is located in – house, island, train, boat – exhibits the "psychological" ones. If Christie followed the pattern Poe put forward, she nevertheless injected a "psychological" dimension to the genre that Poe never intended in his mostly theoretical experiment.

It would nevertheless be wrong to state that Poe's stories emphasise enclosed rooms over interactions between characters. "The Purloined Letter" depicts the search for a compromising letter stolen by a Minister from a Queen and artfully hidden in the Minister's premises. Even though they "took the entire building, room by room" and extensively searched the house twice, the police are unable to find the letter (Poe 1988, 193). As in "Rue Morgue," the police cannot find the (rather simple) solution to an inextricable mystery because someone's confusing *intérieur* obscures their analytical capacities. Yet, in this short story, the enclosure

does not come from the Minister's premises, but rather from the two tight triangles of characters: the King, the Queen and the Minister on the one hand, and the Police, the Minister and Dupin on the other – one who does not see something, one who hides it, and one who sees it, as analysed by Lacan (Felman 1987, 41). These triangles of people who hide something from, play and suspect each other do remind us of Agatha Christie's closed circle. Nevertheless, this psychological dimension is rudimentary, seeing, for example, that Dupin's resentment of the Minister is barely mentioned and left without justification or backstory. On the other hand, Christie refined and developed the importance of the characters' interactions to use their full potential – for example, the whole plot of *Christmas* depends on the criminal's and suspects' resentment and ambiguous feelings for their father.

Lacan's analysis of the characters' triangle also brings to light the role of the detective. Because Dupin – or, more generally, the detective figure – comes from the outside, he is able to bring light and order into the chaos of the inside. Cook wrote that in Poe's short stories,

[i]n the detective's realm, 'inside' is a place of unexpected, inexplicable peril, of chaos which seems to sweep aside even the usual laws of physics. In the detective's realm, 'outside' is a place of banal order and reason, of hopeful safety from the rage whose results stay locked inside a room. It is a place of solved cases. (Cook 2011, 15)

Christie's novels exemplify the chaos of the inside, haunted by internal conflict and secrets eventually brought back in order by the detective. But this dangerous inside is more than a physical space: it is a metaphor for intimacy, disrupted not only by festering quarrels but also by their most public manifestations and by the judgment of the external world. For this reason, one could wonder whether the external world is really a world of peace and reason. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, for example, Styles Court is indeed a place of danger and mystery; yet the outside world it is isolated from is at war and the havoc of World War I is made very clear – Hastings, the narrator, comes back injured from the front while Poirot, the detective, is a refugee who had to flee his country and find asylum in England. The publicity of the murder and trial adds to the very relative "safety" of the outside.

Cook's analysis of the detective's realm also highlights another major similarity between Christie's use of space and Poe's. Indeed, the detective's realm is similar to Gothic literature as both "include similar definitions of 'inside' and 'outside'" (Cook 2011, 15) – outside for order and reason, inside for disorder and terror.

1.1.2. The Gothic space

Enclosure is the common theme that connects Poe's tales of ratiocination and his Gothic tales. Indeed, several of his short stories display a form of physical enclosure that plays a major role in the diegesis. In "The Black Cat," the narrator, morbidly obsessed with a cat, walls up both the still living animal and the corpse of his wife whom he has just murdered – this burial into a hole in a wall echoing the gruesome way the orang-utan stuffed Camille L'Espanaye's dead body into a chimney in "Rue Morgue." "The Tell-Tale Heart" relates the murder of an old man in his bedroom at night and the subsequent concealing of the body under the floorboards of the house. Montresor, the narrator of "The Cask of Amontillado," entombs his friend alive. "The Fall of the House of Usher" exploits the trope to its fullest: the house is a doubly enclosed space, for it is both a grave for Roderick Usher's sister Madeline (whom he has entombed as well) and Roderick's prison, which he never leaves and which is haunted by his sister's wraith. The narrator himself is unable to escape until the very last moment when the house is eventually destroyed in a climactic moment of supernatural terror. Poe makes use of the Gothic motif of the locked room

According to Engel in his essay "Enclosure in Poe's 'The Fall of the House of Usher,'" the enclosure device serves multiple narrative missions: it first provides "artistic focus and unity of impression" (Engel 2001, 182). On a diegetic level, it creates a general "mood of glum" that pervades the story (*ibid.*), it creates settings and intensifies the aura of mystery the writer aspired to create; the accumulation of various forms and representations of enclosure within the same story only increases the gravity of the situation (*ibid.*, 186). Finally, Poe makes use of the traditional Gothic motif of the locked room (and of spatial enclosure in general) because of the inherent evocativeness of such a device. According to Kestner, the locked room allows the most chilling horrors to resurface:

The locked room is so central a motif because it allows the extension of narrative plot to cover or imply a range of additional significances: repression/the return of the repressed, the unconscious, the mother's body (womb), the tomb and death, incest, death and resurrection, narcissism, solipsism, and existential alienation. (Kestner 2000, 236)

The locked room is the narrative device that is best disposed to evoke these themes so central to the Gothic genre, for in the locked room man is alone with himself, entrapped with the darkest parts of his psyche. The enclosed space is remarkably suited to existential questioning: first, it is an absolute and final space reminiscing both of a tomb and of a prison (and thus evocative of the notions of judgement and punishment), and secondly, it is completely cut off from the outside world, meaning that the external influence of society is

removed and that the judgement of his peers ceases to matter. What is left is man reduced and confronted to his barest self: his fears, desires, and past or present actions. Everything shameful that had to be repressed back into the unconscious can resurface in the locked room where no one can see and where the suggestive imagery of entombment and entrapment awakens the most primitive feelings and reactions from the characters.

Poe's use of physical enclosure as a narrative device is thus not only recurring, but also strikingly similar in both his Gothic tales of horror and his Dupin stories. In Poe's universe, closed spaces are connected with murder. They carry a sense of violence and horror and create a general atmosphere of claustrophobia. Enclosed spaces are the world of death and madness. To quote Cook:

In these tales the main protagonists all seem to inhabit a locked room of a kind, be it a tangible architectural space or somewhere within their own psyche⁴ – or, very often, a correlation between the two. They create a world in which inside and outside become of extreme importance, where enclosure forms the boundary between the exterior world of the rational and the interior world of misrule. (Cook 2011, 17)

It is significant that these enclosed spaces, in addition to stressing the murderers' progressive descent into madness, eventually betray them and provoke their doom. The narrator of "The Tell-Tale Heart" is driven mad because he thinks the entombed dead man's heart is still beating, while the guilt of the narrator of "The Black Cat" is exposed by the animal he inadvertently walled up and Roderick Usher is destroyed by the ghost of the sister he killed. This draws a bridge between horror tales and detective stories, for the bodies hidden to conceal one's guilt haunt the house and cause one's end in both genres, albeit in different ways. Guilt, which thus becomes a common pattern connecting the two genres, is also a metaphor likening the culprit's psyche to the haunted house: it makes it impossible for the character to leave the "closed room" of his own mind or to erase and forget his crime.

This difference underlines that the Dupin stories are a clear counterpart to the horror tales: where Poe's Gothic houses are terrifying places of chaos and madness, the locked room of "Rue Morgue," if just as chaotic and incomprehensible, can be sorted out. In the Gothic tales, resolution and justice only come by supernatural means or (self-)destruction; but in the ratiocination world, Dupin's analytical mind is able to solve the murder and thus restore order. In short, where Poe's murderers fall from reason into madness, Poe's detective

⁴ While not featuring the closed place device *per se*, Poe's "William Wilson" conveys a similar sense of claustrophobia, for Wilson's life seems confined, revolving only around his double at the expense of the rest of the world. Wilson's eventual duel with his Doppelgänger takes place in an antechamber where he is entirely alone with a large mirror, suggesting that one's psyche can also be one's prison – thus suggesting a form of solipsism synonymous with confinement and underlining the relationship between enclosure and madness

analyses madness and translates it back into the comforting language of rationality – a process Cook called “the exorcism of the irrational through logic” (Cook 2011, 16).

One short story in particular highlights this fundamental difference between these two types of tales. “The Pit and the Pendulum” relates the mental struggle of a man imprisoned and tortured by the Inquisition. He is trapped in a dungeon completely deprived of light that makes the narrator think of a “tomb” (Poe 1988, 141). The narrator’s sanity deteriorates throughout the story as he discovers a pit he almost fell in, and later the presence of “a crescent of glittering steel, [...] [l]ike a razor” slowly descending from the ceiling in the purpose of cutting him into slices (*ibid.*, 149). The approaching sentence turns time into an instrument of torture, as emphasised by the very appearance of the gigantic razor, for on it is painted “Time as he is commonly represented, save that, in lieu of a scythe, he held what, at a casual glance, I supposed to be the pictured image of a huge pendulum such as we see on antique clocks” (*ibid.*). This agony turns this once rational mind who (vainly) tried to calculate his cell’s circumference and topology into a delirious psyche. “The Pit and the Pendulum,” by its use of the pit – reminding both narrator and reader of the pit of Hell – and of the fearful unknown represented by the dark dungeon endlessly adapted into new torture methods by an invisible torturer, exemplifies how an enclosed, claustrophobic space highlights the struggle of the mind between reason and method on the one hand, and instinct and terror on the other – just as, in the other Gothic stories, enclosure stresses the internal battle between “self-control and perversity,” as “the exploration of the human capacity for evil” (Cook 2011, 15). For this reason, the Dupin tales are the mirror and answer to “The Pit and the Pendulum” – and, by extension, to the other tales of horror – for they present a world dominated by reason, logic and order. The Dupin tales do not only replace psychological struggle with analytic capacities; instead, the destructive forces of the madman’s mind – which so often lead to self-destruction and catastrophe – are used to find and exorcise the hidden guilt – the invisible torturer – responsible for the ambient chaos, metaphorically shedding light in a dark room (Cawelti 1976, 100). In short, Dupin restores social order and allows society to come back to normal, exactly as Hercule Poirot does in Christie’s novels.⁵

⁵ This precarious relationship between madness and rationality is yet another bridge between the Gothic genre and detective fiction. Poe wanted to highlight the easy transition from rational thinking to hallucination. For example, “The Imp of the Perverse” presents a shift from a purely rational narrator to the same-self narrator manifesting clear signs of madness and trying to convince himself of his own sanity. This narrator – a stark opposite of Dupin – is a Gothic double of Dr. Sheppard in Christie’s *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and of Michael Rogers in *Endless Night*, narrators who are actually murderers and break the narrative contract. More broadly, the character that seems most rational out of the circle of suspects often possesses a streak of murderous madness – such is the case of Justice Lawrence Wargrave, who commits murder to satisfy his sadistic tendencies

The Dupin stories thus both exploit and subvert the Gothic trope of enclosure, which leads to wonder how detective fiction writers handled closed spaces after Poe – especially knowing that he was at the origins of the genre. We do not know the extent of Poe’s direct influence on Christie – if there was one – but some of the codes he set for the Dupin tales sustained the test of time. In “Rue Morgue,” the enclosed space is purely functional – contrary to its role in horror stories, where it is a metaphor for the characters’ states of mind – and exists for the sole purpose of furthering the mystery and providing material clues. Christie’s enclosed spaces follow that fashion, for their main purpose seems to give out clues (for example, the map and descriptions in *Orient Express* enable Poirot to find out that Mrs Hubbard was lying about a fundamental clue) and to keep all suspects confined in the same place to facilitate the investigation. Similarly, Christie’s mysteries are solved through reason and analysis, preventing the houses to become *actually* haunted by a supernatural entity – which does not mean that Christie’s locked spaces are devoid of symbolism.

Indeed, there is a Gothic component in Christie’s enclosures that reminds us of both Poe’s tales of horror and of their echoes in Dupin’s adventures. R.A. York noticed that the detective genre is, in essence, a product of the Gothic, for “it may ultimately refer to the common sense and common experience, but like the true Gothic, it has the strangeness and menace of the unknown” (York 2007, 9). In addition, Skenazy remarked that the Gothic and detective fiction

share common assumptions: that there is an undisclosed event, a secret from the past; that the secret represents an occurrence or desire antithetical to the principles and position of the house (or family); that to know the secret is to understand the inexplicable and seemingly irrational events that occur in the present. Both forms bring hidden experiences from shadow to light. (Skenazy 1995,114)

It is not astonishing to find that detective fiction and the Gothic genre are built on a similar basis, given that detective fiction finds its origins directly into the Gothic. However, the number of Gothic elements that are to be found in Christie’s closed circles stories is particularly striking. York observed that Christie’s fictional murders are similar to Gothic deaths because they are “excessive, abnormal deaths” (*ibid.*, 10). One reason for this abnormality is the “excess of signification,” that is to say the excess of violence or of symbolism surrounding the body (as is the case with the L’Espanayes’ bodies, horrendously massacred); another one is that the death “challenges our sense of decorum,” for

death is treated as visual sensation, as artistic pattern, as game. It becomes frivolous, or it affronts our sense of rightness: people die too soon, before we know why they have deserved it or they die in the wrong place, a place alien to hostilities. (*ibid.*)

and his sense of justice in *And Then There Were None*. It also underlines the difficulty to identify the murderer in a circle of rational-looking people, which is why the closed circle goes mad with uncertainty.

Christie often combines both techniques: the murder occurs in an innocuous-looking or shocking place, which is enclosed and presents a mental challenge, *and* it shows either too much symbolism or too much violence for the reader to be comfortable with. In *Orient Express* Ratchett is stabbed in the chest twelve times in his locked cabin; Justice Wargrave's body is found "robed in scarlet with a judge's wig upon his head" (Christie 2011, 222), and in *Christmas*, her only "pure" locked-room mystery,

[t]here had clearly been a terrific struggle. Heavy furniture was overturned. China vases lay splintered on the floor. In the middle of the hearthrug in front of the blazing fire lay Simeon Lee in a great pool of blood... Blood was splashed all round. The place was like a shambles. (Christie 2001a, 97)

Similarly, Christie often combines space and time to add tension. *And Then There Were None* emulates "The Pit and the Pendulum" in that the victims trapped in the island – and incapable of knowing who or where their executioner is – are subjected to a horrific countdown: the murderer takes down one china figure for every victim he has successfully killed. Similarly, time is counted in *Orient Express* and *Curtain* – the short window of time before the train works again, or before a murder is committed, is Poirot's only opportunity of catching the murderer, which also provides temporal enclosure. Limited time adds to restricted, mysterious spaces to create suspense. Space is not only a symbolical, but also dramatic component of the plot.

Suspense is even more pregnant in that ghosts metaphorically tower over the closed circle of suspects in a fashion that reminds one of Poe's Gothic tales and creates suspicion and anxiety. In theory, if a detective is present to restore order, further chaos is avoided when the murderer is identified, the family secrets are spelled out and the victim's ghost can be forgotten – as is the case, for example, in *Styles* or *Christmas*. But in the absence of a Poirot- or Dupin-like figure who can shed light on the chaos, the inhabitants of Soldier Island in *And Then There Were None* descend into madness and die, haunted by the ghosts of the people they killed. Such is the case of Vera Claythorne, who relives the murder she committed when she kills herself. Perhaps more evidently, Emily Brent's madness closely resembles that of Roderick Usher or of the narrators of "The Black Cat" and the "Tell-Tale Heart":

She opened [her notebook] and began writing.

"[...] After luncheon the judge made us a most interesting speech. He is convinced that the murderer is one of us. That means one of us is possessed by a devil. I had already suspected that. Which of us is it? They are all asking themselves that. I alone know...."

She sat for some time without moving. Her eyes grew vague and filmy. The pencil straggled drunkenly in her fingers. In shaking loose capitals she wrote:

THE MURDERER'S NAME IS BEATRICE TAYLOR [the woman whose death she caused]....

Her eyes closed.

Suddenly, with a start, she awoke. She looked down at the notebook. [...] “Did *I* write that? Did I? *I must be going mad...*” (Christie 2011, 174-5)

And Then There Were None is an extreme demonstration of what happens to a closed circle of suspects, especially if they are entrapped together. As shown by the excerpt in Annex A, the characters in this novel suffer from a descent into madness similar to that of the narrator of “The Pit and the Pendulum.” One of them tries to convince himself or herself that he/she can survive, but still obsesses over the disappearance of the revolver. Another one – who suffers from a mental breakdown – is convinced that this is not real and deliriously thinks about Judgment Day, while having the impression that their head is going to burst from being subjected to too much anguish. Another character compulsively repeats the same injunction to “keep their head”: while they try to remain rational (like the narrator of “The Imp of the Perverse”) this compulsion highlights that they are in a delirious state. This descent from rationality is also highlighted by the characters’ return to an animalistic state: they abandon all pretence of civilisation and polite behaviour and instead act either like predators ready to kill (like Blore and Lombard) or like preys (like Vera, Wargrave, and Armstrong).

This atmosphere reminds one of Poe’s Gothic tales, making Christie’s use of closed spaces and closed circles of suspects a complex one, intended to be both functional and anxiety-inducing. Nevertheless, even though Poe was the one who connected detective fiction and spatial enclosure when he created the genre, and even though Poe and Christie have a lot in common as regards enclosure – notably their focus on the understanding of the characters’ *intérieurs* and the connection between enclosure and terror – he was not her primary source of inspiration, for it was Sir Arthur Conan Doyle whom Christie wished to emulate.

1.2. Sherlock Holmes and the popularisation of the detective genre

1.2.1. 221B Baker Street: the detective's refuge from a monstrous world

As mentioned in Part 1.1., Edgar Allan Poe created the original codes for detective fiction but Sir Arthur Conan Doyle was the one who popularised the detective formula, forty years after the publication of "Rue Morgue." The Sherlock Holmes stories – initiated by *A Study in Scarlet* (1887) and followed by three other novels and fifty-six short stories – turned a purely theoretical experiment into a genre of its own.

From a formulaic perspective, Doyle followed Poe's pattern almost to the letter: an eccentric but brilliant detective, a friend-narrator whom readers identify with, police officers who need the detective's help to solve the enigma. The structure is similar too: the story often begins with the detective showing off his talents at deduction on a trivial matter and ends up with the criminal explaining his actions.

The Sherlock Holmes stories also establish the pattern of the armchair detective as Poe created it, i.e. a generic model where nothing is supposed to happen in the story once it has been exposed, except the detective's inferences. Dupin and Holmes are both able to solve the mystery without leaving their apartment if so they wish. Holmes declares so in *A Study in Scarlet*:

"But do you mean to say," [Watson] said, "that without leaving your room you can unravel some knot which other men can make nothing of, although they have seen every detail for themselves?"

"Quite so. I have a kind of intuition that way. Now and again a case turns up which is a little more complex. Then I have to bustle about and see things with my own eyes."
(Doyle 1981, 24)

By listening to the client, reading the press, consulting his archives and using his Irregulars, Holmes is able to see most, if not all, of the truth. In "The Red-headed League," for instance, he has a good understanding of the situation "from the first" (Doyle 1981, 189) and needs "bustling about" only to have more information, while in "A Case of Identity" he solves the mystery without leaving his lodgings, with his only clues being the client's testimony and a press article. Holmes' stay in his apartment in times of crisis reveals his power of reconstitution: he deduces what happened before, elsewhere, while remaining in his armchair (Eisenzweig 1986, 73).

Christie followed this example to a certain extent. Even if her detectives often need to be *in situ* in order to solve the crime – Poirot could not have solved the murder in *Christmas* if he had not seen the striking resemblance between Simeon Lee, Harry Lee and Sugden – she wrote her stories with an aspiration to emulate Doyle's. Her *Autobiography* details her creative process while writing *Styles* and the importance of the Holmes model is obvious: Doyle's stories were a frame of reference for her creation of Poirot, of Hastings (the Watson-like friend-narrator) and of the mystery itself (Christie 1977, 241-246). An excerpt from *The Clocks* emphasises the kinship between Doyle's stories and Christie's:

"*The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*," [Poirot] murmured lovingly and uttered reverently the one word, "*Maître!*"

"Sherlock Holmes?" I asked.

"Ah, *non, non*, not Sherlock Holmes! It is the author, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, that I salute. These tales of Sherlock Holmes are in reality far-fetched, full of fallacies and most artificially contrived. But the art of the writing – ah, that is entirely different. The pleasure of the language, the creation above all of that magnificent character, Dr. Watson. Ah, that was indeed a triumph."

He sighed and shook his head and murmured, obviously by a natural association of ideas:

"*Ce cher* Hastings. [...]" (Christie 1976, 119)

This extract is a testimony to Christie's love of Holmes's adventures, and the association of ideas that connects Watson and Hastings – in a rather tongue-in-cheek way, knowing that Poirot judges his Watsonian companion less than positively – shows how important an inspiration Doyle was, regardless of the personal changes she brought to the genre. This passage also carries on a tradition established by Poe and Doyle, who have their detectives criticise their literary predecessors: in "Rue Morgue" Dupin belittles Vidocq's analytical capacities (Poe 1988, 78) and in *A Study in Scarlet* Holmes disparages both Émile Gaboriau's Lecoq and Poe's Dupin (Doyle 1981, 24-5). This literary continuity emphasises the necessity to study Doyle in order to better understand Christie. This part will thus study the most notable elements of Doyle's use of fictional spaces, for Doyle influenced Christie's writing of enclosure.

The first space introduced in the Sherlock Holmes stories – and also the one that became most closely associated with Holmes – is Holmes and Watson's apartment at No. 221B, Baker Street. On a narrative level, this place provides reassurance in that most of the adventures begin and end there: no matter how dreadful the current case is, Holmes will come back home, ready to welcome new clients. Described as "comfortable," "airy," "cheerfully furnished" and "illuminated by two broad windows" (Doyle 1981, 20), it is a refuge both for

the detective and Watson and for the many clients that seek Holmes's help in times of turmoil.

But the reassurance 221B Baker provides is also due to its isolation. Cawelti noticed that Holmes's apartment is just as secluded and marked off from the rest of the world as Dupin's was, thus defining the detective's apartment as a fixed space, pitted against the scurry of the outside world (Cawelti 1976, 96-97). Where the inside is comforting, the outside is chaotic and threatening. In her essay "Sous le signe des Tropiques ou l'envers du décor holmésien," Hélène Crignon analysed the danger that urban space represents in Doyle's detective stories: London is a labyrinth as menacing as a jungle. This threat is exemplified by the character of Professor Moriarty in "The Final Problem" (Crignon 1999, 33-4):

He is the Napoleon of crime, Watson. He is the organizer of half that is evil and of nearly all that is undetected in this great city. [...] He sits motionless, like a spider in the centre of its web, but that web has a thousand radiations, and he knows well every quiver of each of them. He does little himself. He only plans. But his agents are numerous and splendidly organized. (Doyle 1981, 471)

Moriarty is the embodiment of everything and everyone criminal and dangerous in Holmes's London. In this fictionalised city, crime is everywhere: it is a web, an underground network that relentlessly plans the demise of good Englishmen and Englishwomen and thus weakens society as a whole. This image of the web reminds one of the description Watson makes of London in "The Sign of Four" when he mentions "the monster tentacles which the giant city was throwing out into the country" (Doyle 1981, 99). The depiction of the city as a murderous jungle also makes one see the seclusion of the detective in his lodgings in a rather pessimistic light: that Holmes feels the need to seek a shelter from crime in his own apartments suggests that the possibility of eradicating crime is very thin.

As Ravenel noticed (Ravenel 1994, 15), this omnipresence of criminality nevertheless rejoices Holmes, for whom it means plenty of cases to solve: "He loved to lie in the very centre of five millions of people, with his filaments stretching out and running through them, responsive to every little rumour or suspicion of unsolved crime" (Doyle 1981, 423). This quasi-infinity of crimes to solve is underlined by Doyle, who often mentions exciting cases that his detective has solved without ever writing the full adventure. "A Scandal in Bohemia" thus contains the following references:

I heard some vague account of his doings: of his summons to Odessa in the case of the Trepoff murder, of his clearing up of the singular tragedy of the Atkinson brothers at Trincomalee, and finally of the mission which he had accomplished so delicately and successfully for the reigning family of Holland. (Doyle 1981, 161)

Apart from frustrating the readers, these untold cases reveal that crime lurks not only in the city, but worldwide, since Holmes's clientele is international. Crime is everywhere, without spatial discrimination. This rather worrying feature of the Holmes stories suggests that crime is endless – it occurs everywhere and there is always a case to solve. The assurance that Holmes will stop criminals is comforting for readers but short-lived in regard of the ever-spreading tentacles of crime. This proliferation of cases – and thus of crimes – calls into question the ending of the detective story with regards to the closure it is supposed to bring. In the prototype developed by Poe, the detective restores order in places dominated by chaos. At the end of each of Holmes's stories, order is indeed restored, but the multitude of cases solved by Holmes suggests that this return to peace and harmony is temporary – for it will last until the next adventure only – and that Holmes's victories might be derisory in a world dominated by crime. To what extent does the detective restore social order, in these conditions? Is the ideal of closure and lawfulness promoted by the detective story at all possible?

This depiction of crime as omnipresent and never-ending reminds one of the motto of Christie's Miss Jane Marple: "human nature is much the same everywhere, and, of course, one has opportunities of observing it at closer quarters in a village"(Christie 2016, 83). This statement illustrates Christie's stance on the localisation of crime. She does believe, like Doyle, that crime hides everywhere under the sun, as shown by her frequent use of foreign locations: murders occur in France (*The Murder on the Links*), in Egypt (*Murder on the Nile*), in Iraq (*Murder in Mesopotamia*), on the Orient Express, in the Caribbean (*A Caribbean Mystery*), and some cases have roots in America (*The Mystery of the Blue Train*) or in Africa (*Third Girl*). However, if the Holmes adventures are very urban, Christie's novels feature places that are a lot more isolated and rural. In the Holmes canon, the criminal is often (but not always, as Part 1.2.2. will demonstrate) revealed to be a previously unknown figure that Holmes tracks down in all London, and that is sometimes foreign: such are the cases of Jonathan Small in *The Sign of Four* or Jefferson Hope in *A Study in Scarlet*. By contrast, Christie's murders and investigations occur in circumscribed places – trains, boats, houses – and in fictional country villages: St. Mary Mead for Miss Marple, Styles St. Mary in *Styles*.

This difference might also be due to the very nature of their writings. Doyle apparently hesitated between pure detective fiction and adventure, an uncertainty all the more understandable since detective fiction was rather undefined at the time. In his novels – a format that presented more freedom than short stories, Doyle often chose to write a first part focused on the detection process and a second half focusing on the criminal's past, which often involved exotic spaces and elements such as treasures and secret societies. On the other

hand, Christie wrote domestic whodunits and had thus very little need for exotic mysteries – even though a few of her detective novels involve such subplots, like *Cat Among the Pigeons* in which the theft of an Oriental diamond is at the heart of the murder.

Another difference between Doyle's writings and Christie's is the manner in which the detective comes to intervene in the mystery. Doyle draws his inspiration from Poe – more exactly from "The Purloined Letter" – once again. All Sherlock Holmes stories follow the same pattern: the peacefulness of Holmes's home is disrupted by a client or by the police who seek his help – or, occasionally, by a threat as in "The Adventure of the Three Gables," by Mycroft Holmes in "The Adventure of the Bruce-Partington Plans", or Watson himself is drawn out of his house by a telegram from Holmes. For Herzinger, this intrusion of the outside world into the safety of the inside is best exemplified by Moriarty's attack on the apartment at 221B in "The Final Problem" (Herzinger 1992, 115). It is a narrative proof of the chaos and unbalance of the outside world:

First, the sudden disruption of the quiet and secluded retreat is an effective emotional rhythm. [...] The crime symbolizes not only an infraction of the law but a disruption of the normal order of society. It is something extraordinary that must be solved in order to restore the harmonious mood of that charming scene by the blazing fireplace. This manner of introduction also emphasizes the detachment of the detective, his lack of moral or personal involvement in the crime he is called on to investigate. The crime represents a disorder outside the confines of his personal existence, which thrusts itself upon him for resolution. (Cawelti 1976, 83)

If the detective is able to solve the murder, it is mainly because he is isolated from and uninvolved in the affairs of the world. The detective's eccentricity and non-conformism (Eisenzweig 1986, 128-9) become the quality that enables him to solve the crime – quite paradoxically given that the law enforcer that preserves social order does *not* fit in the social frame, which in turn makes that preservation rather flimsy. Where Moriarty is the spider that reigns over London's criminal web, Holmes reads and uses the very same web from a distance – using newspapers and his Irregulars – in order to bring back order. This eccentricity and similarity with Moriarty, Holmes' literary double, also highlights the thin line between madness and reason that is at the very origin of the Dupin stories. It is no coincidence that Watson notices "what a terrible criminal [Holmes] would have made had he turned his energy and sagacity against the law, instead of exerting them in its defence" (Doyle

1981, 112).⁶ The porous line between detective and criminal is underlined in Christie's *Curtain* as well, when Poirot murders Norton to prevent more crimes from being committed.

This detachment makes Holmes the perfect detective in a Victorian society frightened by the sudden appearance of a working class they thought criminal and badly educated, and by an increasing divide between social classes (see Clausen 1992). Because Holmes is uninvolved, he can be an intermediary between all social classes – although his connection to criminal classes makes him unfit for full social integration, hence his portrayal as an eccentric, or, in Watson's words, as a "Bohemian soul" (Doyle 1981, 161). This also marks a contrast with Christie, who generally portrays the upper middle class, with a few exceptions (one of those exceptions being domestics in *Orient Express*, and a few Lords and Ladies; see 3.1.1.).

This is not the only difference between Doyle and Christie as regards the manner in which the detective is introduced to the mystery. Poirot is rarely hired by the police or by a client. Instead, he is often already present when a crime occurs, as in *Curtain* or *Orient Express*. This early presence enables him to see the tragedy unfurl and to witness everyone's strange behaviour. When Poirot *is* hired, his appearance is generally delayed until after the crime is committed so that the reader can witness the pre-tragedy drama – see for example *Christmasor Mesopotamia*. Christie focuses on her characters' psychology to make her mysteries and solutions work, thus distancing herself from Doyle who had a more scientific approach to clues and who did not always feature his criminals in his stories before the resolution.

Christie's psychological focus also explains another major difference between Dupin and Holmes on the one hand, and Poirot on the other: where Dupin's and Holmes' homes are described, Poirot's apartment is rarely featured. *The ABC Murders* describes the place, Whitehaven Mansions, as modern and extremely symmetrical; it is not intended to be homely, but to satirise Poirot's love of symmetry. Contrary to Holmes, Poirot appears directly in the crime scene rather than in his own home. This peculiarity underlines his status as an outsider but also makes him, paradoxically, an insider privy to every important piece of information – which is useful given that Poirot needs to hear and see in order to deduce the truth. In Christie's novels, then, the detective is not strictly an outsider: see, for example, Miss Marple who solves murders that occur in her very hometown. This new relationship between

⁶ Sherlock thinks the same of his (even more brilliant) brother Mycroft in "The Greek Interpreter": "If the art of the detective began and ended in reasoning from an armchair, my brother would be the greatest criminal agent that ever lived" (Doyle 1981, 436).

detectives and crime scenes gives Christie's fictional places a lot more psychological importance than Doyle's, perhaps as an incidental consequence of Christie's possible desire to account for the changes in British society and sometimes to criticise them – the Marple novels thus allow for a criticism of the isolation of a limited social circle, for example.

In spite of his scientific focus, Holmes' role as mediator is nevertheless an intrinsically social one. The intrusion of the chaotic outside world into the safe haven of 221B Baker Street mirrors the intrusion of crime in a respectable house, borough or office: just as crime enters 221B and reveals a disorder, Holmes enters the crime scene to bring back order. The detective's apartment and the crime scene echo one another (Cawelti 1976, 96-7), but their intricate connection also reveals that, for the Victorians, crime is also, and perhaps above all, a threat to privacy. If the client soliciting Holmes's help penetrates his private sphere, at least he does so with Holmes's consent; but such is not the case of the criminals' victims. According to L.A. Fillingham, murders in the Holmes canon are all the more scandalous as "the body, as violated corpse, has left the private realm for good and is now the subject of public inquiry, to be put on display": every aspect of the victim's life, every room in his house is submitted to the police's inquiry and to the public gaze (Fillingham 1992, 163). The terror of exposure also explains why a considerable number of Holmes' cases are not murders, but embarrassing thefts ("The Three Students," "The Naval Treaty"), blackmailing ("A Scandal in Bohemia," "The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton") or mysteries based on a family secret ("The Adventure of the Priory School," "The Adventure of Abbey Grange"). That in comparison Poirot and Marple mainly investigate murders reveals that Christie's fictional society is more permanently endangered than Doyle's. In this context, social respectability in Christie's novels appears as a flimsy cover of a general social corruption – especially given that most of Christie's suspects have something morally reprehensible to hide.

This important number of family secrets in Doyle's work (and in Christie's too) is proof that every family has its own discrete private sphere that no one can fully penetrate; or, in Doyle's words in "The Adventure of the Blanched Soldier," "every family has its own inner knowledge and its own motives, which cannot be made clear to outsiders, however well-intentioned" (Doyle 1981, 1003). The outside world fundamentally cannot understand these private spheres. But the detective, as mediator transcending the boundary between inside and outside, can, and he will only use his understanding to restore the client's intimacy and the world's general order. Holmes's clients would rather ask for his help than go to the police: even though Holmes is *de facto* a voyeur who will scrutinise and unveil every distasteful aspect of one's life, he is

infinitely preferable to the police – while [he] may violate the secrets of the family, at least [he is] already privy to the secrets of class. So there is a distinct limit to Holmes' curiosity; he resists the exposing of private life to the public that is essential to the detective story. (Fillingham 1992, 163)

In order to make the client's inside world and the outside world safe again – to “recreate the outside in the image of the inside” (Herzinger 1992, 114) – Holmes does not hesitate to keep the solution to himself (especially as he despises publicity) or to violate the law (as in “The Adventure of Charles Augustus Milverton”). Watson follows suit by only writing his stories down when their implications can no longer cause scandal: “I may say that the writers of agonized letters, who beg that the honour of their families or the reputation of famous forebears may not be touched, have nothing to fear” (Doyle 1981, 1095).

This relationship between inside and outside is found again in Christie's novels. Just like Holmes, Poirot is an outsider, all the more so as he is foreign.⁷ This trait of Poirot's is insisted upon, for instance in *Mesopotamia*:

I don't know what I'd imagined – something rather like Sherlock Holmes – long and lean with a keen, clever face. Of course, I knew he was a foreigner, but I hadn't expected him to be *quite* as foreign as he was, if you know what I mean. (Christie 2001b, 125)

As one can see in this extract, Poirot is even more of an outsider than Holmes is. In fact, Poirot is unafraid to show his un-Englishness to the point of ridicule (Makinen 2006, 37-9). In addition, he presents feminine qualities such as concern over his appearance, vanity, and obsession towards domestic details (*ibid.*, 39-40). This unusual taste for traditionally feminine hobbies is also noted in *Mesopotamia* with a thinly veiled amount of distrust and amusement on the narrator's part that makes Poirot sound comedic: “there wasn't anything – no small scrap of insignificant gossip – in which he wasn't interested. Men aren't usually so gossipy” (Christie 2001b, 183). Nevertheless, his feminine qualities are necessary to penetrate the quintessentially feminine domestic sphere. Indeed, Davidoff *et al.* explain that the idea of the home – and more largely, the domestic sphere – is intrinsically connected with femininity:

In literature [...] the wife—mother—house—mistress image often merged with the physical symbol of the house so that it became difficult to visualize the woman as having a separate identity from the house; in a sense she *became* the house. (Davidoff et al. 1995, 52)

To be female or female-coded thus seems a requirement for the detective: while he must see the closed circle from a distance that allows him to be objective, he still must have a deep

⁷ Miss Marple similarly remains at the margins of society by virtue of her being an old unmarried woman. In addition, she most often than not chooses to remain outside of the investigation process, usually relying on other people's accounts to see the truth or even sending someone else to seek information on her stead: in *4:50 from Paddington* for instance, she hires Lucy Eyelesbarrow to investigate the Craddock household in her stead.

understanding of the domestic sphere the circle dwells in. Similarly, his aim as a detective is to restore the order of this inside sphere, a mission that is traditionally feminine: a woman's "special task was the creation of *order* in her household" (*ibid.*) and if the males of the house were discontented with their domestic sphere and sought to escape home, then the women of the house need to "[make] home more attractive, warmer, better organized, more comfortable, more sprightly," (*ibid.*, 53), "for the domestic organic community was the upholder of moral order in a chaotic external world" (*ibid.*, 52). Although Poirot's characterisation differs largely from Holmes', their mission is the same: to restore order in troubled households (and thus uphold a moral order that the terrifying outside world threatens) thanks to a combination of critical distance from and yet understanding of the domestic sphere.

In Doyle's works, the warm sanctuary of 221B Baker Street is thus pitted against the monstrous, disorderly outside. The detective's detachment from society allows him to oscillate between the two worlds, but also to cross the boundaries separating one's private sphere from the public world and to restore order and intimacy. Nevertheless, the characterization of and the interplay between these two spaces also fulfil an atmospheric purpose and gives both reader and detective clues to understand the mystery at hand.

1.2.2. Space in the Holmes canon: atmospheric function or utilitarian function?

Space in Holmes's adventures possesses a double function: not only does it give the stories their peculiar atmosphere, but inhabited spaces are full of signifiers that reveal the truth about one's private sphere and that Holmes and the reader must interpret.

The most important of these inhabited spaces is the apartment at 221B Baker Street, whose primary function is atmospheric. 221B appears as an asylum to the reader because of its extreme intimacy. This mythical location is given an atmosphere of its own by means of multiple signifiers that give away Holmes's peculiarities: "The Musgrave Ritual" thus mentions the "tobacco in the toe end of a Persian slipper," "unanswered correspondence transixed by a jack-knife into the very centre of his wooden mantelpiece," the chaotic omnipresence of papers and chemicals and Queen Victoria's initials engraved in the wall in the form of a series of bullet holes (Doyle 1981, 386). While everything related to the web of criminality outside is neatly recorded in an alphabetized index (Doyle 1981, 494, 1034), the rest of the apartment is in a state of chaos that reveals Holmes's personality and makes his apartment a unique place, rather than a bland, merely functional one. Because this space is

personal, it becomes intimate and thus homely. In Herzinger's words, it is "an imaginative space which is the very image of what he protects [...] – [...] security, warmth, friendship, propriety without rigidity" (Herzinger 1992, 114). In short, Holmes's apartment is a private sphere where social conventions apply not so rigidly.

On the other hand, the outside appears perilous and unwelcoming not only because of its proliferation of criminals, but also because it is given a dark atmosphere that betrays its monstrosity. A first layer to this gloomy atmosphere is the anonymity of the mass of people who live in London. For example, in *The Sign of Four*:

There was, to my mind, something eerie and ghostlike in the endless procession of faces which flitted across these narrow bars of light—sad faces and glad, haggard and merry. Like all humankind, they flitted from the gloom into the light and so back into the gloom once more. (Doyle 1981, 98)

This frightening anonymity is further increased by the consequent number of foreigners living in London, whose presence was frightening to Victorian Englishmen. According to H  l  ne Crignon, the urban space in Holmes's adventures is pervaded by an exoticism that is connected to crime (Crignon 1999, 27-28). In *The Sign of Four*, for example, Thaddeus Sholto's house is an extravagant museum of Indian curiosities; this atmosphere is described as "out of place," while the house itself is located in a "sordid" environment (Doyle 1981, 100). Similarly, in "The Man with the Twisted Lip," the opium den at the core of the story is situated in "a vile alley lurking behind the high wharves which line the north side of the river," "between a slop-shop and a gin-shop," and looks like "a black gap like the mouth of a cave" (Doyle 1981, 230). In Holmes's London, places pervaded with an illicit and/or immoral, often Oriental, presence are dark, dim-lit and frightening in order to better show their rampant criminality.

In the case of "The Man with the Twisted Lip," the atmosphere is even darker as the plot unfurls in the East End. As Lo  c Ravenel noticed, every borough of London is socially coded in Holmes's adventures. Even though Holmes's adventures are confined to a real physical space (every street Doyle mentions existed in the London he knew), its geography is highly fictionalised. Doyle's London is a lot more spatially segregated and disparate than the real London actually was. Each borough is coded in order to reveal a key detail about its inhabitants (Ravenel 2007, 1): the East is a space of crime, fear and exoticism (Ravenel 1994, 27-28, 30); the South, with its bars and factories, is the den of the working-class (*ibid.*, 43, 46-47); the West End and its prestigious architecture is the world of the upper-class where scandal is to be avoided at all cost (*ibid.*, 66), etc. Geography in Doyle's novels thus does not matter only because it gives an atmosphere to the story: because each area has its determined

(and determinist) function in this fictionalised world, the outside space gives out details that are necessary to understand the plot and what is at stake.

Things go differently in Christie's world. For one, most of the settings she uses in her novels are invented. St. Mary Mead, Styles St. Mary, Soldier's Island are all fictional places that are easily interchangeable: which village or house the murder is committed in is irrelevant, for several reasons. The first one is that her fictional places are often isolated to focus on the closed circle of suspects only. For this reason, the circle's surroundings only matter when they highlight something about its members: in *Styles*, Styles St. Mary is important only because its inhabitants whisper and gossip about the suspects, while in *And Then There Were None*, Soldier's Island has only been chosen for its perfect isolation. Similarly, in Christie's novels, the danger is not coded geographically or by help of physical indicators; if the atmosphere is unhealthy, it is not because of the house itself but because of the people in it, and the setting merely bears traces of this social issue (see 3.2.1.). This is why in *Curtain*, Hastings thinks that during the events of *Styles*, people were unhappy "because they felt like prisoners" (Christie 2002a, 47). In Christie's novels, the inside – its geography, its atmosphere – matters more than their geographical surroundings.

However, geography is not the only element in Doyle's fictionalised settings that has both an atmospheric and a utilitarian function. Climate, and its impact on the spaces Holmes investigate, plays a fundamental role. The weather and most notably the fog (both analysed in detail in Ravenel 2007) give the story a very sinister tone:

Look out this window, Watson. See how the figures loom up, are dimly seen, and then blend once more into the cloud-bank. The thief or the murderer could roam London on such a day as the tiger does the jungle, unseen until he pounces, and then evident only to his victim. (Doyle 1981, 913)

Yet climate also provides clues for Holmes. In "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," for example, Holmes is able to deduce the identity of the criminal thanks to footprints left on a muddy ground; similarly, in *A Study in Scarlet*, the lack of rain is determinant to analyse prints left by a cab and to deduce when it came and who it carried. This double function of climate also appears in Christie's novels: in *Orient Express*, the passengers are stranded by the snow, which both gives the story a confined atmosphere and provides clues to the detective (as the climate makes it impossible for the murderer to have come in or out the wagon); in *And Then There Were None*, the storm isolates the characters on the island and gives the story a sinister atmosphere. In this novel, the geographical and social isolation of the characters is as factual and utilitarian – for it is, in and of itself, a necessity for the story – as it

has a psychological toll on the characters: Annex A clearly shows the mental damage (paranoia, terror and mental breakdown) caused by complete isolation with a murderer.

Open spaces are not the only ones that have a double function in Doyle's – and Christie's – stories. Closed, isolated spaces are just as important, especially given that Doyle develops and elaborates the notion of crime among the family circle (Cawelti 1976, 99) – something that was a huge inspiration to Christie later on. This is where Holmes's ability to quell the threats to the private sphere is most useful. One can indeed notice that a consequent number of Holmes's adventures takes place in a closed, domestic milieu: *The Valley of Fear*, "The Boscombe Valley Mystery," "The Adventure of the Copper Beeches," "The Reigate Puzzle," "The Adventure of the Abbey Grange," "The Adventure of the Devil's Foot," "The Adventure of the Speckled Band" and several others are such stories. These stories all present Holmes and the reader with a family-focused plot, be it the uncovering of a family secret or a crime committed within the family circle. Not only does the plot generally remain confined in the family house and its immediate surroundings, but it rarely strays outside of the restricted circle of family members – and this enclosure is often materialised in the text by the house's completely closed gates (Ravenel 1994, 210).

These domestic spaces are all the more enclosed as they are usually located in the countryside and are isolated from other habitations. On the one hand, this complete enclosure means that the criminal cannot have come from the outside, and that the culprit is necessarily inside the circle of characters Holmes and the reader already know about. On the other hand, it forces the writer to limit his family circles: one to three suspects, one to three victims. These constraints are deliberately built to fit the short story format that requires being to the point: there must be no unnecessary character and the reader must not be distracted or lost by too many suspects at once. This construction is a prototype for Christie's future closed circle of suspects, which presents the same characteristics for the same reasons. Her choice of the novel format allowed for more suspects, more clues and more twists and turns, but the strategy is the same as Doyle's: limiting the suspects to a number both the reader and the detective could reasonably deal with.

That these domestic milieus are located in the country is relevant both to Doyle's pattern of isolation and to his influence on Christie. Paradoxically, the openness of space in the countryside makes it confining due to the scarcity of inhabitants, meaning that even an open space can be "closed" if no social interaction is possible. The drawbacks of such closed social circles in a space otherwise seen as idyllic are underlined in "The Copper Beeches":

“ [...] You look at these scattered houses, and you are impressed by their beauty. I look at them, and the only thought which comes to me is a feeling of their isolation and of the impunity with which crime may be committed there. [...] The pressure of public opinion can do in the town what the law cannot accomplish. [...] But look at these lonely houses, each in its own fields, filled for the most part with poor ignorant folk who know little of the law. Think of the deeds of hellish cruelty, the hidden wickedness which may go on, year in, year out, in such places, and none the wiser.” (Doyle 1981, 323)

Just as in Christie’s novels, human nature and its defects are best seen in a village. For Doyle, isolation and individualism present a danger: the more one is away from civilisation, the more their evil deeds go unseen – and the more they feel they can get away with it. While the country is idealised in the novels, it is just as criminally populated as London. This opinion fits with Christie’s statement that human nature is the same everywhere and with her tendency to have murders occur in country houses or otherwise isolated places. This similarity also highlights the different statuses of the countryside space in Doyle’s and Christie’s respective works: while Holmes rarely goes into the countryside and when he does it is usually after he met some upper class client who needs his help in his or her country estate, in Christie’s works many investigations take place in the countryside exclusively. This difference might highlight a possible divergence in Christie’s novels as regards isolation and individualism.⁸

Even though these spaces are originally created to justify a small set of characters and a self-contained action, their physicality is also put into good use in Holmes’ stories. They have an atmospheric function: in “The Copper Beeches,” for example, the house is “a large square block of a house, white washed, but all stained and streaked with damp and bad weather” (Doyle 1981, 324). But besides setting a sinister mood to the story, enclosed spaces are necessary components of the mystery. This particularity is best illustrated by the fact that several short stories feature detailed plans of a house (“The Adventure of the Golden Pince-Nez”), a room (“The Naval Treaty”), or a village (“The Adventure of the Priory School”), or an extensive description of a place’s topography – a street in “The Red-headed League,” a property in “The Musgrave Ritual.” In each of these stories, the geographical study of space is instrumental in solving the mystery at hand, in a way that reminds one of the importance of maps and plans in Christie’s novels – one of those is capital to the resolution in *Orient Express*, for instance.

More widely, this attention to geography and topography illustrates that one of Holmes’s main talents is his capacity to read and analyse inhabited spaces, for “[w]hat is a blank wall to others is covered with signifiers to Holmes” (Fillingham 1992, 161). In *A Study in Scarlet*: he

⁸ This question will be later explored in Part II of this *mémoire*.

immediately analyses the house and then the crime scene, and comes up with a physical description of the murderer:

I had this fellow's stride both on the clay outside and on the dust within. Then I had a way of checking my calculation. When a man writes on a wall, his instinct leads him to write about the level of his own eyes. Now that writing was just over six feet from the ground. It was child's play. [...] The writing on the wall was done with a man's forefinger dipped in blood. My glass allowed me to observe that the plaster was slightly scratched in doing it, which would not have been the case if the man's nail had been trimmed. (Doyle 1981, 33)

This talent reminds us of Poirot, who reads rooms both literally, as he interprets clues, and figuratively, as he interprets the inhabitants' behaviour. Holmes's talent is more scientific than sociological in nature, however, even though the understanding of the atmosphere of a room or a house is episodically of importance, for example in *The Valley of Fear*: "I shall sit in that room and see if its atmosphere brings me inspiration. I'm a believer in the genius loci" (Doyle 1981, 803). Given the importance of house atmospheres – be it psychological or architectural atmosphere – in their works, Doyle and Christie were believers in the genius loci as well.

Holmes's talent for reading rooms once again proves capital in *The Sign of Four*, "The Adventure of the Three Students" or "The Devil's Foot," but also in "The Adventure of the Speckled Band," Doyle's retelling of Poe's "Rue Morgue." Like Poe, the study of the disposition of the rooms is enough for Holmes to deduce how the murderer, an animal, operated, with a few differences – the animal is a snake and it obeyed a human master. Nevertheless, Doyle's story poses the same paradox as Poe: by stating that the room was completely locked, the mystery can be solved only by ultimately revealing a secret passageway. But the story cannot betray the limits it imposed itself when saying that no human could have entered the room, and in the end it needs a non-human force to be responsible. The complete enclosing of a room or house is thus impossible, no matter how hard Poe, Doyle, or Christie try in their stories (Eisenzweig 1986, 57-8).

In the end, this comparison between Doyle and Christie allows us to pinpoint what Christie adopted and what she changed in the model Doyle set for detective fiction. The omnipresence of criminality, the importance of intimacy, the detective's status as mediator between inside and outside, the double function of space as atmospheric and utilitarian and the importance of geography in a mystery are elements that Christie adopted from Doyle's work and adapted in her own representation of closed spaces. Christie's use of space nevertheless differs from Doyle's: the detective's apartment does not serve as a negative mirror image for and intimate

refuge from the criminal world; the detective integrates himself or herself in the suspects' private sphere, thus making that sphere more psychologically focused; realism is not so perceptible as in Doyle; and countryside space in Christie is not so much opposed to urban space as it constitutes one of the predominant *locales* of her stories – which, in turn, leads to wonder about the problematic of isolation in Christie's works. The limits of enclosed literary spaces, as exemplified by Poe and Doyle, were also a concern for Christie – limits that Gaston Leroux, and then John Dickson Carr, tried to challenge and overcome.

1.3. *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* and *Le Parfum de la dame en noir*⁹: Gaston Leroux's influence

1.3.1. The beginnings of the closed circle of suspects

Le Mystère de la chambre jaune, published in 1908, was a crucial influence on Agatha Christie when she began writing detective stories. According to her *Autobiography*, the reading of *Chambre jaune* – which she called “one of the best” because of “a neat little clue cleverly slipped in” – sparked her desire to write detective novels (Christie 1977, 198). In *The Clocks*, Poirot – who did not hesitate to criticise Holmes – lauds the novel as well:

“That – ah, that is really a classic! I approve of it from start to finish. Such a logical approach! [...] All through there is truth, concealed with a careful and cunning use of words. Everything should be clear at that supreme moment when the men meet at the angle of three corridors. [...] Definitely a masterpiece [...].” (Christie 1976, 116-7)

Christie adopted a similar structure in her novels, choosing logic and disseminating clues throughout the whole text and often concealing them by aid of a “cunning use of words.” The similarities between *Chambre jaune* and *Christmas* abound as well: in both cases the plot focuses on a locked-room murder (or aggression) that was actually committed by a policeman *before* the room was sealed, and both stories present the readers with disguises, false identities, an abundance of blood in the sealed room, secret parentages and secret or repressed unions.

There is thus no doubt that Leroux tremendously influenced Christie and her writings. Nevertheless, as I will argue in this part, his influence extended further than matters of plot structure and dissimulation of clues, for one can find the beginnings of Christie's signature closed circle of suspects in his novels.¹⁰

Chambre jaune and *Parfum* present a pattern of physical enclosure that is repeated time and again. Mathilde Stangerson is in her completely closed room during her aggression, the murderer is completely surrounded by Mathilde's protectors and trapped by the architectural construction of the house during the episodes of the “galerie inexplicable” and of the “bout de

⁹ In this part, I have chosen to refer to the French editions of *Le Mystère de la chambre jaune* (*The Mystery of the Yellow Room* in English) and *Le Parfum de la dame en noir* (*The Perfume of the Lady in Black*) in order to make apparent all the nuances of Leroux's writing that might otherwise be lost in translation. It is also worth noting that Agatha Christie mastered the French language – it is thus possible that she read Leroux's novels in French.

¹⁰ Whether or not Christie read *Parfum* is up for debate. While this novel presents striking similarities with her closed circle pattern – and while the plots of *Parfum* and *Mesopotamia* are almost identical –, she never mentioned her reading it. On the other hand, one cannot exclude the possibility that she read it (since she had liked *Chambre jaune*, it is only logical that she read the follow-up book) but disliked it. At any rate, the undeniable resemblance between *Parfum* and her novels suggests that *Parfum* was a decisive (even though perhaps unconscious) inspiration.

cour” – that court being “un carré entouré de fosses et de hautes grilles” (Leroux 2013, 239) – and in *Parfum*, the castle is carefully guarded from any external intervention. This pattern of closure is not limited to the most extraordinary episodes of the novels, however: in *Chambre jaune*, the castle is guarded by the police at all times, and the plot also features precious documents stolen from a locked safe. This architectural enclosure, comprising wide spaces (the two castles), small spaces (the safe) and everything in between (rooms and corridors alike) creates a sense of claustrophobia that pervades the novels.

This insistence on hermetically sealed space is further emphasised by the extremely detailed maps Leroux regularly included in his novels. Both novels contain two to three maps each (Leroux 2013, 52, 140; Leroux 2011, 69, 74, 138) as well as several pages detailing the exact topography of each place (Leroux 2013, 141; Leroux 2011, 69-73). This emphasis on mapping is similar to Christie’s, who often used maps as well in order to make the setting clearer to her readers (see for example *Orient Express* or *Styles*) but also to hide subtle clues: just as the identity of the murderer should have become clear in the gallery, as Poirot points it out, the location of each suspect in *Orient Express* (or, to mention another novel, in *Death in the Clouds*) is a clue that completes the detective’s investigation. This is part of the “reading contract” between the detective fiction writer and the reader: the novel must provide all the clues the detective has access to in order to guarantee the reader has a fair chance of solving the case (see 1.4.1. for more details about the rules codifying the genre as regards to the use of space).

Nevertheless, this geographical interest also reveals a few differences between Leroux and Christie. The descriptions of Christie’s fictional places are a lot less verbose than Leroux’s and her topography and maps are much simpler. Leroux wanted to highlight the apparent impossibility of the murderer’s appearances and disappearances and to create a sense of suspense that gave his stories a rather sensationalist streak: this is particularly true for the “impossible gallery,” an action-heavy episode that lasted several chapters.¹¹ On the other hand, Christie’s novels tend to feature less *peripeteia* and more investigative content such as interviews and testimonies, meaning that her maps and topographical descriptions worked essentially as clues – in other words, their primary purpose was not to make the mystery seem impossible, as Leroux wanted, but to give the reader the tools to work out the solution. This ties in with the major distinction between Leroux and Christie: even though Christie was tremendously inspired by Leroux’s use of space and enclosure, her novels focus on logic and

¹¹ One remembers that *Chambre jaune* originally was a serialised publication – hence the need for suspense.

detection only, while Leroux's novels have a strong melodramatic component.

This also raises the issue of realism in the corpus. In Doyle's stories, Holmes's London roughly corresponded to the reality of the actual London's geography, with a few alterations motivated by a desire to make the social divisions and challenges of the time clearer. Leroux similarly grounds the Château du Glandier and the Fort d'Hercule in a realistic France and gives plenty of details about their exact location. He also invents an extremely precise history for both these fictional places (Leroux 2013, 36-40; Leroux 2011, 67-9). This omnipresent grounding of fictional spaces in a realistic background goes along with *Chambre Jaune*'s documentary nature (for the novel features several official reports), in an attempt to make this adventure less "romanesque" (Eisenzweig 1986, 157).

On the other hand, it must be noticed that in spite of this apparent realism, Leroux's settings and accompanying histories are fictional. This peculiarity gives the story a hybrid relationship to reality: while the settings (and events) are invented, the writer makes them fit with reality as if they were not. This paradoxical feature of Leroux's story is probably an answer to a dual exigency of the genre: on the one hand, the story must possess a context the readers can recognize and understand the codes of, but on the other hand, the setting needs be flexible enough for the writer to invent his own story and tricks, which would not necessarily work in an existing place – provided that the writer were able to find a place corresponding to his intentions, which is not a given: the mystery of the yellow room, of the gallery and of the "bout de cour" only work because Leroux created and adapted his fictional geography to fit the plot.

In comparison, Christie seems to go back in some way to the method of Poe, whose depiction of Paris is largely fictional – emphasis is put on the story's main setting instead of the background, which is less detailed. As a consequence, the comparison between Christie and Leroux makes apparent a rather striking paradox: Christie's settings seem rather detached from reality and history, with a few exceptions – for instance, *Styles* and *Taken at the Flood* mention the World Wars, and the novels situated in the Orient feature actual places (see *Orient Express* or *Murder on the Nile*). On the other hand, while Leroux's novels relinquish realism, for his plots are very melodramatic and implausible (see for instance the fact that Rouletabille is actually related to both victim and culprit, the revelation that the culprit is actually a world-renowned criminal, or the switching of identities in *Parfum*), his attention to historical detail and geographical precision makes his novels seem more true to life than Christie's. Her novels feature not only invented houses but also fictional villages; her fictional places are rarely given a historical background and are barely described in detail; in

comparison, Leroux's precision gives his novels a more realistic atmosphere in spite of the improbability of their plots.

The extreme precision of Leroux's enclosed spaces also highlights that spatial enclosure means social enclosure as well, for the number of characters physically present in the enclosed space is necessarily limited. In other words, if a place is hermetically sealed, no one can come in and as a consequence, only the people contained inside can be responsible for what occurs within the walls of the sealed space. This principle applies to Mathilde Stangerson's aggression in the yellow room: since no one could have come inside to try and murder her, then only Mathilde can be responsible for the shots fired inside the room. When it is not one but several characters that are entrapped in a closed space, however, a community of suspects is formed to which the culprit must necessarily belong. This is what happens in the gallery or in the "bout de cour:" both mysteries are explained by the fact that the culprit was never outside, but *inside* the circle of people gathered in the closed space, and that he never disappeared. In Rouletabille's words: "*Quand nous étions là, dans le carré de bout de cour, l'assassin s'y trouvait encore avec nous !*" (Leroux 2013, 241; emphasis not mine).

Rouletabille himself uses the image of the circle to refer to all people, clues and events pertaining to the mystery, entrapping them all in his mind to study them just as the novel itself entraps them in a locked space to facilitate the investigation. Rouletabille's declarations about his mental circle echo Poirot's and highlight the influence Leroux had on Christie:

" [...] j'ai tracé un cercle dans lequel j'ai enfermé le problème, et autour du cercle j'ai déposé mentalement ces lettres flamboyantes : « Puisque l'assassin ne peut être en dehors du cercle, *il est dedans !* [...] »" (Leroux 2013, 249)

"[...] There is in this crime such a restricted circle that it cannot possibly take long to arrive at the truth. [...]" (Christie 2001a, 261)

"[...] The only thing that [Mr Hardman's] evidence *did* show was that no one *in any other part of the train could possibly have murdered Ratchett*. It drew a clear circle round the Stamboul-Calais carriage. [...]" (Christie 2001c, 334)

This image of the circle also emphasises another resemblance between Rouletabille and Poirot, this time in terms of methods. In this passage, Rouletabille, like Poirot, and as opposed to Larsan and Holmes, focuses on mental reasoning (in short, an understanding of the situation, of people's comings and goings and on people's states of mind) and warns that physical clues can be misleading. In Leroux's novels as in Christie's, a psychological reading of people is just as important as a physical reading of the room where the crime was committed. This is exemplified by the fact that the correct understanding of what happened in the yellow room depends not only on physical marks but also on their combined analysis with Mathilde's behaviour (see also Goulet 2005). This emphasis on psychological reading is a

return to Dupin's method of analysing the Minister's state of mind, which also highlights that by reading one's state of mind, the detective identifies with him or her. Beyond the fact that this is on par with the detective's capacity to enter and understand one's private sphere, this is particularly relevant plot-wise in *Chambre jaune*: the identification between Mathilde Stangerson and Rouletabille is significant, for they are mother and son.

Leroux and Christie and their closed circle of suspect pattern thus put an emphasis on people and their behaviour, which also insists on the psychological toll the closed circle ploy has on the entrapped characters. The image of the circle is pertinent because it implies that all characters inside this circle are *equally* suspect. The reader is invited to consider all characters as being the potential murderer, but another consequence is that characters become just as suspicious as the reader. In *Chambre jaune*, everyone starts suspecting and distrusting each other, which divides them and prevent their safety: "Ici chacun se défie de tous... la fille se défie du père... et la fiancée se défie du fiancé..." (Leroux 2013, 213). As in Christie's novels, this general suspicion is furthered exacerbated by the many secrets innocent characters keep from each other: Mme Mathieu and the guard have an affair, Père Jacques helps out Mme Mathieu, the Berniers poach... All those secrets add other mysteries and other suspects to an already complicated case and make it look more complex than it already is.

This atmosphere of suspicion is made even worse in *Parfum*, in which all characters suspect each other of being Larsan in disguise. Sainclair is notably confronted with the impossibility to say whether he is facing Darzac or Larsan, and Mathilde is unsure which of the two men she married, leading her to become mad. This generalised suspicion is exemplified by one passage in particular:

Un malaise indéfinissable se glissait dans mes veines. J'aurais voulu fuir, et il me parut que si je me levais, je n'aurais point la force de me contenir... Le silence que nous continuions à garder contribuait à augmenter cet incroyable état d'hypnose... [...] Tout à coup, je tournai la tête et je regardai derrière moi. Alors, je compris, à ce geste instinctif, que j'étais la proie d'un phénomène tout naturel... Quelqu'un me regardait, ... deux yeux étaient fixés sur moi, *pesaient* sur moi. Je ne vis point ces yeux et je ne sus d'où me venait ce regard, ... mais il était là, ... je le sentais... *et c'était son regard à lui*... Et cependant, il n'y avait personne derrière moi, ... ni à droite, ni à gauche, ni en face, ... personne autour de moi que les gens qui étaient assis à cette table, immobiles derrière leurs binocles noirs... Alors, ... alors, j'eus la certitude que les yeux de Larsan me regardaient derrière l'un de ces binocles-là !... Ah ! les vitres noires ! les vitres noires derrière lesquelles se cachait Larsan !... (Leroux 2011, 131-2)

This excerpt shows the similarities with Christie's nightmare of doubt and distrust (Combes 1989, 72-3). The terror that the narrator feels upon realising that the murderer is one of them is almost supernatural: Larsan's eyes on him are similar to the evil eye, an omnipresent yet

invisible harbinger of doom. This scene from *Parfum* evidently made a great impression on Christie, for this very specific imagery recurs in all of Christie's closed circles in one way or another, for instance in *Mesopotamia*:

It wasn't somehow a very comfortable sort of meal. [...] Lately our meals had been hushed and subdued, but for all that there had been a feeling of comradeship. There had been sympathy with Dr Leidner in his grief and a fellow feeling of being all in the same boat amongst the others.

But tonight I was reminded of my first meal there – when Mrs Mercado had watched me and there had been that curious feeling as though something might snap any minute. [...] Tonight it was particularly strong. Everyone was on edge – jumpy – on tenterhooks. If anyone had dropped something I'm sure somebody would have screamed. (Christie 2001b, 273-4)

I *felt* that the murderer was in the room. Sitting with us – listening. *One of us...* (*ibid.*, 139)

These extracts, remarkably similar to Gaston Leroux's description of the group's suspicions, show the potential Christie perceived in Leroux's novels and what features of his novels she selected and amplified in order to create her closed circle formula. This imagery of the suspects sitting around a table reveals the tense atmosphere within the group that leads to the complete disintegration of camaraderie and social bonds. That this epitome of paranoia is most often associated with the act of sharing a meal is telling: this type of scene represents a subverted ideal of *equality*, because all the characters are gathered instead of conducting their own business and they are *sharing* a table, which implies a lack of social hierarchy in the group.¹² In this case, this equality, far from being ideal, becomes disturbing, as emphasised by the fact that all this equal potential achieves is to make each character cast suspicious sideway glances in *all* directions, in Leroux's novel as in Christie's closed circles. Indeed, in both cases, the characters go insane with the certainty that the murderer is "one of us" and the impossibility to pinpoint who the culprit is – and the fear that he or she will strike again and kill them. This is apparent in the extract from *None* presented in Annex A. Like Leroux, this excerpt emphasises the relationship between watching and paranoia, for all the characters keep a close watch on each other. Not only are they all on the lookout, observing the others to ensure that the murderer does not take action, but, as in Leroux's novel, each of them is aware that the murderer is watching them in return and planning his or her next move. The repetition

¹² In addition, the table the characters sit around may very well be imagined as a metaphorical Round Table of sorts – an apt comparison if one takes into account Susan Rowland's analysis that detective fiction can be read as a retelling of the Arthurian myth in which the hero turned detective looks for the Grail, i.e. the truth, in order to heal an ailing social order (Rowland 2010, 48). In this case, the 'Round Table' – a metaphor for the closed circle – becomes a twisted version of equality: the characters are indeed equals, but only because *all of them look equally guilty, without exception*.

of “one of us” in italics underlines the terror associated with the certainty that the murderer is with them: the emphasis on this expression makes it clear that this revelation haunts them. Their paranoia leads them to a state of constant alarm and to suspect everyone: one of them thus feverishly imagines that Dr. Armstrong is in fact a madman escaped from a psychiatric hospital, even though no element points to that unlikely scenario.

In Leroux’s novels, the nightmarish psychosis is aggravated by two factors. The first one is Larsan’s uncanny talent to impersonate anyone he wishes. His identities are multiple: he is Jean Roussel, Ballmeyer and Frédéric Larsan, he can be Père Jacques and Darzac. He can take anyone’s place, he can accuse anyone he wants, and he (literally) hides his true face in the shadows. While this reversibility of identity is the link used by Leroux between the detective genre and the melodrama (especially given that the culprit is revealed to be an extraordinary bandit), this peculiar talent of Larsan’s actually echoes a more haunting question: do we really know the people we love? In a closed circle story, the murderer is “one of us,” but there is no tell-tale sign that reveals which individual is guilty. Larsan’s numerous disguises illustrate that in a detective novel, the guilty party is but a dangerous individual wearing the mask of a civilised, normal person – like Norton who dissimulates his sadistic nature under a mask of shyness in *Curtain*. The murderer is duplicitous, “*un personnage qui est deux, c’est-à-dire qui est, outreson personnage, le personnage de l’assassin*” (Leroux 2013, 250). The multiplication of Doppelgängers in Leroux’s novels mirrors the false identities assumed by Christie’s murderers – whether these are actual false identities or a metaphorical representation of two-facedness, like Evelyn Howard, the loving companion and murderer, in *Styles*. Nevertheless, this problem also extends to the rest of the circle of suspects: even if they are not murderers suspects often hide something, be it their actual identity (see Pilar and Stephen in *Christmas*, for instance) or an incriminating secret – in this case, secrets range from harmless actions (Ralph Patton from *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is secretly married) or personal problems (Freddie Rice from *Peril at End House* is a drug addict) to criminal activities (Valerie Hobhouse in *Hickory Dickory Dock* smuggles drugs, Tim Allerton in *Death on the Nile* is a thief, Theresa Arundell in *Dumb Witness* intended to poison her brother). Because criminal motives can potentially be shared by all the characters, suspects are only minimally different from the actual murderer. Not only does that worsen the characters’ psychosis, but, similar to the profusion of cases to solve in Sherlock Holmes’s adventures, it also highlights that the genre is based on a *merely temporary* reestablishment of order – and that, in spite of the detective’s arrest of murderers, society is still threatened by ordinary criminals and ill-intentioned people.

The second factor is the atmosphere of the house (or, in this case, castle) that mirrors the characters' feelings of horror. The house is described as looking like "un tombeau, un vaste mausolée au fond d'une forêt abandonnée" (Leroux 2013, 51). The weather goes accordingly: "de la boue sur la terre, de la suie au ciel" (*ibid.*), "vent froid et pluie ; ténèbres opaques, silence" (*ibid.*, 146). The episode of the gallery is similarly striking for the way it emphasises the omnipresence of darkness. This Gothic atmosphere is reinforced by the screaming of a cat nicknamed "la Bête du Bon Dieu," the appearance of a phantom-like figure (actually Mme Mathieu going to see her lover), and the grotesque, frightening silhouette of the murderer: "un dos monstrueux, courbé" (*ibid.*, 153). If this sinister atmosphere highlights the characters' feelings and the omnipresence of an ominous, ever-looming threat, it also calls attention to the importance of the *genius loci*: the atmosphere is capital to understand the suspects' states of mind. Similar to Christie, Rouletabille needs being *in situ* to understand the case.

This necessity for the detective to be *in situ* also lays emphasis on the fact that even though the murderer is incredibly dangerous because he is inside ("Je le redoute moins dehors que dedans !" Leroux 2011, 113), the enclosure means that the murderer is just as entrapped as the other characters – and thus, the detective can watch, identify and catch him or her. Such is the aim of the precautions taken during the gallery episode and during the lockdown of the Fort d'Hercule. In Christie's novels, it is also the reason why Poirot takes the opportunity of investigating the murder of *Orient Express* right away. This makes the feeling of claustrophobia created by the accumulation of closed spaces more ambivalent, for containment becomes as much a comfort – guaranteeing the suspects' safety – as a discomfort.

In Leroux's novels, however, the entrapment of all characters inside the castle is even more striking as the castle is isolated, and the catching of the murderer is complicated by the fact that he seems to forcefully penetrate and leave the castle when he pleases. This extreme entrapment thus *seems* to be inefficient in the end, which brings to light the patterns of isolation and intrusion at stake in Leroux's and Christie's novels.

1.3.2. The dynamics of isolation and intrusion

In *Chambre jaune* and *Parfum*, the precautions taken to prevent Larsan from entering the castles and attacking Mathilde (precautions that are revealed to be of no use, for he is already inside) result in the complete isolation of the closed circle of suspects. But that complete isolation from the exterior was allowed and facilitated by the fact that both castles were already geographically cut off from the world before the aggressions began.

Chambre jaune mentions the Stangersons' topographical seclusion:

Un autre vieux château, dans les environs, [...] était également abandonné, de telle sorte que le pays était à peu près inhabité. [...] Quelques maisonnettes au bord de la route [étaient] à peu près tout ce qui rappelait la civilisation dans cet endroit délaissé [...]. (Leroux 2013, 38)

This complete isolation from the civilised world is also highlighted by the wild, unkempt appearance of the Glandier: "Cette terre [...] avait reconquis, grâce à la négligence ou à l'abandon des propriétaires, l'aspect sauvage d'une nature primitive [...]" (*ibid.*, 37). Similarly, the Fort d'Hercule in *Parfum* is a fortified castle built on an island.

As mentioned in Part 2.1., this isolation from civilisation enables the writer to have a restricted number of suspects and to allow both readers and detectives to find the solution: only the people who inhabit the place and their regular visitors can technically be guilty. But as was noted about Sherlock Holmes's world, a very socially limited place seems to be more dangerous than any bustling city. In *Parfum*, for instance, Mathilde begs Darzac not to isolate them but to enter a room (in this case, a wagon) that is already full of people (Leroux 2011, 56). In Leroux's novels just as in Doyle's, a lack of social interaction and of civilisation is dangerous, for the constant presence and watching of other people foreign to the family sphere seems to prevent the murderer from taking action – in other words, the smaller the community, the greater the possibility of crime.

This is yet another similarity between Leroux and Christie, for the latter often situates her fictional murders in places that are entirely cut off from the outside world. The variants are numerous but in each case the setting is geographically segregated from common society, causing characters to have little to no social interaction with the outside world. This retired life is intriguing: even though isolation is practical in terms of plotting, it still needs to be justified in the text, and one could think that complete seclusion from the world is not the author's only solution to reduce the numbers of suspects. Its use is even more surprising that it is anti-realistic, especially when it is repeated from novel to novel: that every single one of Leroux's and Christie's milieus be isolated is too big of a coincidence in novels that aim to

mimic reality. Why then this emphasis on social and geographical isolation?

The similarities between Leroux's and Christie's geographically and socially isolated places do not end there, however. In *Chambre jaune*, this retired life is chosen by the Professor and his daughter. Even though they are rich and famous, and thus belong to a very worldly sphere, they choose isolation over civilisation: "Ce parfait délaissement avait été la raison déterminante du choix de M. Stangerson et de sa fille" (Leroux 2013, 38). For Eisenzweig, this eccentricity is a sign of an economic isolation that announces Christie's later "archetypal universe." Eisenzweig sees in Leroux's (and Christie's) choice of topographical isolation a rejection of the social and economic reality of the time. The microcosms at the centre of the novels are privileged, although, paradoxically, their cosy environment is intended to make questions of money less apparent (Eisenzweig 1986, 206-7). As Dubois notices, the Stangersons' universe is very Proust-like, for they belong to the upper class, a "class made for leisure" that structures its world in a very aristocratic manner: the rich landlords, heirs and professors on the one hand, and the loyal servants on the other (Dubois 1992, 165-6). This socio-economic division of characters is similar to what we find in Christie's novels, whose characters are hardly ever servants or members of the working class (with the exception of *Orient Express*). From a purely technical point of view, part of the reason for this choice lies in the logic of the genre which tries to reduce the novel to a purely deductive game impervious to outer influences like the social constructs. Nevertheless, this reason applies more to Christie than to Leroux who did not write a purely detective story, for he injected an important melodramatic streak in his stories; it also does not quite explain why Christie chose this specific pattern times and again with little to no alterations, in spite of the variety of options. Why then this need to reject the economic and social reality of the period and to focus on the upper class from the countryside? Should one see there an idealisation of the countryside, or a reading and commentary on issues of class?¹³

The boundary separating the private sphere from the outside world, and highlighted in Part 1.2, is thus even more pronounced when that private sphere lives a retired existence away from civilisation – from a geographical but also a social point of view. But this isolation, no matter how extreme, is not a protection against the rest of the world: the murderer always finds his way inside, thus intruding in one's private sphere.

As seen in Part 1.2.2., the locked-room ploy is inherently a proof that no space can be hermetically sealed: the mystery is impossible precisely because someone *must* have

¹³ See Chapter Two.

necessarily penetrated the sealed space, and the author has to find a trick to justify the murderer's impossible trespassing. In *Chambre jaune*, the ruse is that the aggression was committed before the room was locked and that the shots were fired by Mathilde herself; the apparent impossibility of the gallery and the "bout de cour" are explained by the fact that the culprit was already inside; in *Parfum*, no one can spot the intruder because Larsan is disguised as Darzac. In all those cases, protective walls fail to prevent Larsan from sneaking in. Either Larsan manages to get in and out of the house at will (as is the case when he first attacks Mathilde) or he integrates the Stangers' private sphere and becomes an unsuspected familiar of the house. This peculiarity points to the logical quandary of the genre: although there has been an intrusion, it is not perceived as such because the intruder is already there when the story begins.

In Christie's works, the murderer similarly manages to integrate the victim's private sphere. In *Christmas*, Sugden does not belong to the Lee family *per se*, and neither do Alfred Inglethorpe and Evelyn in *Styles* – the former is Emily Inglethorpe's new, ill-adjusted husband, the latter is a servant. Wargrave in *And Then There Were None* and Norton in *Curtain* integrate a community that did not exist before their intervention so that their intrusion, which consists in playing with people and meddling with their lives, is less obvious. In *Orient Express*, Ratchett is murdered for having destroyed a peaceful home. This specific example reveals that sometimes the victim can be an intruder as well: such is the case in *Christmas*, *Crooked House* and *Appointment with Death* (the three victims inflict psychological torture on their family), in *Death in the Clouds* (the victim is a blackmailer) or in *Cards on the Table* (the victim toys with the suspects for his own amusement). All intruders are thus punished one way or another, for integrating someone's private sphere for nefarious reasons is not condoned.

More than a trespassing, the murderer's invasion is a violation of one's intimacy. The study of Sherlock Holmes's adventures in Part 1.2 pointed out that privacy was a priority that needed protection at all costs. An example in the Holmes canon would be "The Adventure of the Speckled Band." Roylott's motive – preventing his stepdaughters from marrying because it would deprive him of his late wife's income – reminds one of "A Case of Identity," in which a man disguises himself to seduce his stepdaughter for a quasi identical motive. Roylott's motivation thus borders on the incestuous, and by making a snake penetrate the twin sisters' bedrooms, Roylott metaphorically invades their private space.

In *Chambre jaune*, the psychological horror of violation is at the centre of the plot. Mathilde accidentally shoots herself during a night terror that makes her relive her aggression.

Here, the murderer's aggression damages Mathilde's psyche: she becomes haunted by Larsan and mad with terror, not unlike the characters of Christie's *And Then There Were None*. Rouletabille calls this an "assassinat latent" (Leroux 2013, 185): it is not simply that Mathilde will be killed at some point or another, but that she is dying of terror. But Mathilde cannot put an end to her torture, for Larsan's violation threatens her privacy in other ways. Not only would her secrets hurt her father, but the public is now privy to the private details of her life and is obsessed with it: if Mathilde wants to preserve her intimacy and avoid a scandal, she must keep silent, even if it puts her in danger. The public's scrutiny also puts Darzac, the main suspect, in danger, for people blindly condemn him – a pattern Christie often repeated in her novels (e.g. *Styles*).

This threat of exposure also creates a paradox: in order to preserve one's intimacy, secrets must remain private, but in order to restore order and exorcise the murderer's haunting presence, the detective must seek the complete truth. In Rouletabille's words, as long as they will not know how Larsan entered the castle, "nous voudrions le savoir, et il sera là debout, dans notre esprit. Il faut le chasser !" (Leroux 2011, 189). In the end, Rouletabille chooses a middle ground and reveals the bare minimum to the public – for, as he says, he is neither the police or the justice (Leroux 2013, 244). The detective's role becomes double, for protecting means both saving people and keeping their secrets – as Sherlock Holmes does.

However, in spite of all the things Christie adapted from Leroux – the circle of suspects pattern and its psychological consequences, the dynamics of geographical and social isolation, the violation of the private sphere, the predilection for the family milieu – their respective detective roles and statuses still present important differences. In Christie's novels, and as underlined in Part 2.1., the detective is an outsider who infiltrates one's private sphere to better understand it. At first Rouletabille seems to fit that pattern, but the knowledge that he is actually the victim's and the culprit's son challenges his role in the narrative. Regardless of the Oedipal undertones of the story – for Rouletabille is childishly attached to his mother, and is his father's rival and admirer both – this revelation makes Dubois call *Chambre jaune* and *Parfum* a family romance (Dubois 1992, 161): Rouletabille's adventures become a tragic family saga and he becomes not only an interested party but also an insider too involved. For instance, he refuses to condemn his father and lets him go at the end of *Chambre jaune*, which means not only that the murderer escapes unpunished but that he will come back.

This also brings to light the hybrid nature of Leroux's novels: his stories combine tragedy, comedy (in the court scene, for example), sensationalist adventure and Gothic descriptions. Leroux mingles deduction, romance and melodrama (the last one being especially true given

that the novels rely on melodramatic figures, such as the orphan, the extraordinary villain and the victim struggling to keep her honour intact). In this sense, Leroux's novels are more akin to the Victorian sensation novels and, as such, are not yet fully-fledged detective stories. Christie, on the other hand, wrote "pure" detective fiction – although her adaptation of Leroux's patterns of enclosure, isolation and intrusion accounts for her occasional integration of sensationalist elements such as false identities and the episodic presence of a spy or a bandit in the circle of suspects (see for instance Dr. Bauerstein, a German spy, in *Styles*). Several of Leroux's patterns thus proved determinant in Christie's writings, but Christie adapted those in order to fit into a form of detective fiction that focused exclusively on the mystery to be solved and that was strictly defined by a series of rules and conventions.

1.4. The Golden Age of Detective Fiction

1.4.1. The rules of the game and the codification of the genre

The 1920s and 1930s, during which Agatha Christie started her prolific writing career, were a turning point for detective fiction. This era came to be called the “Golden Age of Detective Fiction” because of the genre’s extreme popularity, of the multiplicity and proficiency of detective fiction writers (especially in Great Britain), and because it was during this period that what is now known as the “classic” formula of the genre – also called the whodunnit – came to flourish.

While the fundamentals of detective fiction originally set by Edgar Allan Poe remained unchanged (see Part 1.1.1.), the Golden Age established conventions for the writing of detective stories, thus turning a genre that often ventured into the territories of sensationalism and romance into an extremely codified one. In spite of the tremendous influence previous detective fiction writers, like Doyle and Leroux, had on her works, Christie’s novels and the variations she brought to the genre can only be evaluated in the light of the genre’s formula and codes established during the Golden Age, for not only are Christie’s novels classic whodunnits peculiar to that Age, but Christie herself was the main representative of this practice of the genre and still embodies it today.

The transition from earlier forms of the detective story to the standardised whodunnit has all to do with what sets Christie apart from Doyle and Leroux. After the First World War, the readers of mystery fiction started to want stories that were less sensational in nature and had more to do with an actual process of detection; they wanted to “play the game” as well, to try and discover the solution on their own (Eizensweig 1986, 37-8; Sayers 1946, 97). In other words, they wanted to come back to the original structure of detective fiction as it was intended by Poe: a deductive challenge for the detective and the readers alike. Another fundamental element to this transition was the desire for detective fiction to be acknowledged as a genre in its own right, and a respectable one as that, as opposed to popular literature such as adventure novels (Eizensweig 1986, 39; Bargainnier 1980, 5). In order to achieve both aims, detective fiction had to rid itself of hybrid components (such as the sensationalist element) in order to focus on the mystery alone.

Both purposes also necessitated the emergence of strict rules that the genre would have to follow. Not only did rules and commandments guarantee that the genre be taken seriously – since, to quote Eizensweig, a genre can only be defined if it is codified – but they also acted

as a contract between reader and author that ensured that the game would be fair (Eisenzweig 1986, 38-9). This accounts for the publication of the “Rules of the Game”: S.S. Van Dine’s “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” (1928) and Ronald Knox’s “A Detective Story Decalogue” (1929) (refer to Annex B for Van Dine’s rules and Annex C for Knox’s).

It would be wrong to assume that these rules were all followed to the letter. Christie in particular broke several rules: Van Dine 4 and Knox 7 in *Christmas and Curtain*, Van Dine 12 in *Styles* and several other novels, Van Dine 20b in *Peril at End House* and *The Sittaford Mystery*, Van Dine 20f in *Lord Edgware Dies*, Knox 4 in *Death in the Clouds* and so on (see Curran 2011, 45-65, for an analysis of the two sets of rules and a detailed list of Christie’s transgressions). Nevertheless, while they were neither flawless nor followed blindly, the rules found their origins in what the public and the authors felt detective fiction *should* be – this is why they echo even the novels written before the rules were published. According to Van Dine himself, his work was but to write down the implicit rules that the writers of the Golden Age followed: “for the writing of detective stories there are very definite laws — unwritten, perhaps, but none the less binding” (Van Dine 1946, 189). The rules were “a body of criticism [...] which tried to lay down the limits within which writers of detective stories ought to operate” (Symons 1992, 104).

As a result, the majority of these rules highlight the necessity for fair play in detective novels. Van Dine 1, 2, 5, 8, 9, 14 and 15 as well as Knox 2, 4, 6, 8 and 9 ensure that reader and detective be on equal footing at all times: no clue could stay hidden from the reader, the mystery had to be strictly rational, the solution had to be found by natural means. Bargainnier, who retrospectively established a list of ten principles that the classic detective formula followed, explained in his Principles 4 and 5 that detective fiction was a puzzle and that the author (while he or she was allowed to “conceal [and] distort” the truth) needed always be fair to the reader (Bargainnier 1980, 17). Other rules precluded the hybrid nature of previous detective stories by eliminating romance (Van Dine 3) or sensationalist adventures (Van Dine 8, 13, 19, Knox 2). The Detection Club Oath itself had members swear not to use dissimulation, coincidence, and supernatural or sensationalist elements (The Detection Club 1948, 198). While Christie and her contemporaries did not comply with such rules to the letter (they often included some light romance, for instance), these principles were mostly respected: detective novels became problem-focused and mostly devoid of hybrid elements.

The rules of fairness had to apply to the murderer as well: the reader needed to be able to deduce who had committed the crime, and so the culprit had to feature in the story early on and to be given an important role (Van Dine 10, Knox 1). This excluded servants and the

working class who, at the time, were not deemed worthy enough to have an important role in a novel (Van Dine 11, although Christie does not abide by it exactly: several of her servants are murderers or at least accomplices, for instance in *Styles* or in *Orient Express*).

Since the genre was a game, however, it needed to be exciting and thus suspenseful. It needed, in short, a certain number of believable suspects – according to Bargainnier’s list, it is important in the classic detective story that “the reader must suspect *everybody*” (Bargainnier 1980, 17), which implies not only that the reader must be wary but *also* that the author must make every character look suspect. The “cast,” so to speak, of suspects was to be an essential part of the story and to be more developed than in Poe’s or Doyle’s works. This increase in the number of characters also had to do with a change in the predominant form of detective fiction: while Poe and Doyle mostly wrote short stories, the writers of the Golden Age chose to mainly write novels, which allowed for a more varied set of suspects and for more suspense and development.

However, the vision of the genre as game and the rule of fair play made the literary treatment of the guilty party rather delicate: while the culprit needed to be an important character, he or she could not appear as *more* important than the other suspects before the solution was revealed. A solution for all characters to look equally suspect while having an equal importance in the plot was to ground them all in a single place, as it gave them all equal opportunity and equal means to commit the murder while giving them an equal presence in the narrative. As seen in Parts 1 and 2 of this chapter, this would also single out a reasonable, but still stimulating, number of suspects, while excluding the possibility that the murder was committed by an unknown intruder or by *anyone* in the neighbourhood – someone neither the detective nor the reader could ever hope to find except through the author’s intervention, which would definitively go against the principle of fairness.

The potential and usefulness of enclosed settings was not lost to earlier detective fiction writers: as was shown in Parts 1.2 and 1.3, Doyle and Leroux both used a version of that pattern. Other authors, whose influence on Christie was lesser, used such settings as well: let us mention Anna Katharine Green’s *The Leavenworth Case* in which the house was locked before the murder and remained unlocked until after its discovery; several of Baroness Orczy’s short stories in which the murder could only have been an inside job, for instance “The Mysterious Death on the Underground Railway,” “The Glasgow Mystery” and “The Theft at the English Provident Bank”; and a few of Mary Roberts Rinehart’s early novels: *The Man in Lower Ten* and *The After House* are closed door mysteries on a train and on a yacht

respectively, and *The Case of Jennie Brice* relies on a flood that isolates the inhabitants of a house from the rest of the world (though the guilty party is known from the start).

The closed circle format is also particularly suitable to involve the reader into the detection process. Indeed, the reader's active involvement is what turns the genre into a game. Laetitia Gonon, in her article "Le roman policier à énigme, péché criminel d'Agatha Christie" notices that from the years 1920s to 1940s, i.e. the apotheosis of the Golden Age of detective fiction, publishers sold books the last few pages of which were in fact a notebook of sorts where the readers could jot down clues and ideas as they were reading; the last pages of the story itself were glued together and could only be opened after the readers had taken the time to come up with a theory of their own. According to Gonon, this turned the book into an actual game¹⁴ (Gonon 2021, 26). This involvement is reminiscent of the success met by board games such as Cluedo (invented during the Golden Age) or party games such as murder parties¹⁵, which Christie was fond of to the point that they inspired the premise of *A Murder is Announced* in which the murder is committed during a murder party. Several of Christie's closed circles are also often adapted into murder parties even to this day, showing the resemblance between the two formats. Like a murder party or a game of Cluedo, the closed circle format gives the reader/player all the elements he/she needs to investigate and find the solution, as well as a limited set of characters to play against and a limited setting to explore: the board in the case of Cluedo (reminiscent of Christie's maps), the room in the case of murder parties that take into account the surroundings. In the case of detective fiction, however, the reader/player does not play against the murderer or the other characters but against the author herself:

Ce jeu, on sait qu'y participent, d'une part, l'auteur, qui présente l'énigme, ou plus exactement le problème, et, d'autre part, le lecteur, qui est invité à parvenir à la solution avant que celle-ci ne soit exposée par le détective. Le principe consistant pour l'un à se baser sur les seules données (les « indices ») distribuées de diverses manières au cours du récit et, pour l'autre, à fournir ces données, justement, tout en rendant leur perception problématique. (Eisenzweig 1986, 38)

¹⁴ And also into an object of consumption to be read only once and discarded once the solution was revealed. A similar observation can be made about the serialized dimension of detective fiction, including Christie's: once a detective story is read, there is nothing left to do but to read another if one wants to play the game again. However, Annie Combes argues that Christie's novels can be re-read with pleasure, for a second reading reveals the subtle nuances, tricks and hidden clues that Christie uses; analysing how Christie duped her readers is a pleasure in itself (Combes 1989, 38).

¹⁵ Several 21st-century games also fit that pattern and highlight the lasting success of such a formula – for instance the French card game *Les Loups-Garous de Thiercelieux* (*The Werewolves of Millers Hollow* in English) and the video game *Among Us*. In these two games, the teams of players must find the murdering imposters who are hidden among them by using observation and logic and analysing alibis and behaviours. Escape games (very successful as of late) work similarly: although the players usually do not have to investigate each other, the observation of the room and of physical clues is reminiscent of the detective genre (several games in fact draw on the Holmes and Poirot stories) and necessitates, once again, the player's full involvement in the mystery.

This means that the general climate of suspicion that affects the characters (see Chapter Three of this *mémoire*) is the *consequence* of this game intended for the readers: it is the result of the writer's strategy to confuse the reader and turn the story into a complex riddle to decipher. The fact that all characters appear guilty is not only a condition *sine qua non* of the game, but also a way to make the game complex – for the reader to find enjoyment in beating the author and the detective at their own game, in being more intelligent than them. However, the author's purpose is to win the game too: Annie Combes acknowledges that a good detective novel is a novel that presents the reader with a paradox, that of an impossible guilt (“l'impossible culpabilité,” Combes 1989, 25): a successful detective story is a story in which the reader still did *not* find the solution on his/her own, even though he/she had all the clues and the solution appears clear as day once the book ends. The only way the reader can stand a chance to win the game is be suspicious of everyone and everything in a closed circle. In that sense, the closed circle mystery can be seen as the most effective – or, at least, the most successful and popular – way to play the game of detection.

It is no wonder, then, that when confronted with the conundrum posed by the dissemination of suspicion among the characters Christie turned to this existing pattern of enclosure and refined it into what is now called the closed circle of suspects. This refinement, first seen in *Styles*, consists in suppressing any sensationalism or romance that featured in the works of earlier authors, in making her story and thus her circle a pure puzzle for the reader to solve (Symons 1992, 102), and in emphasising the connection between physical lockdown and social isolation – both in the sense that isolation enables to pinpoint a restricted number of suspects, and because the crime marks the suspects off from the rest of society as potential murderers and thus pariahs. *Styles* also features what was to become the classic formula of the closed circle pattern (and of the Golden Age formula): “the classic country-mansion setting” (Lehman 2000, 107), the family milieu, and believable, personal motives for each and every family member.

This question of plausibility, however, is probably the most arduous aspect of the closed circle of suspects. While its use was deemed necessary in order to justify a reduced list of suspects, the reverse was not quite true: how to justify that all suspects conveniently happen to be in the same place at the time of the murder, and that the setting is just as conveniently enclosed as to leave no doubt that the murderer is to be found amongst them? Raymond Chandler in particular found the closed circle far-fetched for this very reason:

[The detective story] must be credibly motivated, both as to the original situation and denouement; it must consist of the plausible actions of plausible people in plausible

circumstances, it being remembered that plausibility is largely a matter of style. This requirement rules out most trick endings and a great many “closed circle” stories in which the least likely character is forcibly made over into the criminal, without convincing anybody. It also rules out such elaborate mises-en-scène as Christie’s [*Orient Express*], where the whole setup for the crime requires such a fluky set of happenings that it could never seem real. (Chandler, n.d.)

The question of realism is not left out from the rules either – especially given that by the time of their being drafted, the closed circle of suspects had already been in use for years – although its treatment seems rather paradoxical. Knox 3 seems to seek a form of topographical realism by forbidding the unlikely presence of too many secret rooms and passages. Van Dine, while he does not impose such restrictions on space, aims to limit detective fiction within the confines of believable crime: Van Dine 13 forbids the use of secret societies, Van Dine 17 that of professional criminals, Van Dine 19 that of politics and professional spying. These rules originate from the Golden Age’s insistence on fair play: in theory, the reader can hardly compete against trained assassins, international plots and organised crime.¹⁶ As a consequence, and as Van Dine 19 explicitly demands, murders in detective fiction need to be everyday-life murders. From a realistic point of view, this can be questioned: is the impressive number of crimes committed in detective fiction (and in Christie’s books) at all possible in real life, and is the nature of these crimes (such as that committed by the spinster mentioned by Van Dine) plausible? Should detective fiction be true-to-life, given that it is supposed to be a game and that games do not need to be realistic? While answers to these questions may vary and it is doubtful whether we might one day find a consensus (especially regarding murderers that have less common motives, such as Norton in *Curtain* or Wargrave in *And Then There Were None*), this brief account reveals that during the Golden Age the typical setting of detective fiction needed to be a familiar, banal one. Even though Christie did not comply with the principle of believable motives all the time, her settings seem to obey it rather well: all of her fictional houses could be real houses, be it in *Styles*, *Christmas* or *Curtain* (perhaps because Christie took inspiration from her own houses), Soldier Island is a mostly realistic island (actually modelled after Burgh Island) that only an eccentric history made look as a strange place, and the Orient Express was a real train.

On the other hand, while Van Dine’s rules seem to strive for a form of realism, Van Dine 16 is rather perplexing. Its forbidding of descriptions (be they physical descriptions or

¹⁶ Christie does use these ploys, but in her adventure stories: *N or M?*, *They Came to Baghdad*, *The Man in the Brown Suit* and *The Secret of Chimneys*, among others, include international intrigue, espionage and secret societies. Although they possess a whodunnit element, they are *not* detective novels. The only exception is *Cat Among the Pigeons*: in spite of its being a whodunnit, it focuses on a stolen Oriental diamond and one of the murderers is a trained spy.

atmospheric ones) save for “sufficient descriptiveness” (Van Dine 1948, 192) does not seem to concur with his other exhortations for detective fiction to seem true to real life. How could a story describe realistic events if it contains almost no description to make the setting look lifelike? The same question applies to Christie, whose descriptions of Styles Court, Soldier Island and Gorston Hall are minimalistic (save for maps that only give technical detail and do not reveal what the place *looks* like) while, on the other hand, actual places like the Orient Express in the eponymous novel are described at length and rely heavily on topography. This apparent paradox is explained by Bargainnier in his list of principles of the classic formula:

Classic detective fiction does not fall into the literary mode of realism; rather, it uses verisimilitude, realistic and plausible detail, to tell a story which more closely resembles the earlier tale than the realistic fiction of the past hundred years. (Bargainnier 1980, 17)

It is important here to differentiate between the terms “realism” and “verisimilitude”. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines realism as

a mode of writing that gives the impression of recording or ‘reflecting’ faithfully an actual way of life. The term refers, sometimes confusingly, both to a literary method based on detailed accuracy of description (i.e. verisimilitude) and to a more general attitude that rejects idealization, escapism, and other extravagant qualities of romance in favour of recognizing soberly the actual problems of life. (Baldick 2008, 281).

Thus, when Bargainnier writes that detective fiction does not obey to the conventions of realism and requires verisimilitude instead, he means that detective fiction is not meant to faithfully describe our world without literary embellishments or fictional elements; instead, it requires “detailed accuracy of description” – with the caveat that only “sufficient descriptiveness” is needed, i.e. there must be few details but every detail that is described must look true to life, as not to distract the detective fiction reader from the mystery at hand.

In addition, the classic detective novel needs to “reflect the reader’s everyday experiences” (Van Dine 1948, 192) and thus the reader only needs to identify the setting as familiar. It does not necessarily have to launch into *too* detailed and specific descriptions (*à la* Leroux, for instance) for it needs verisimilitude over actual realism – the latter might actually *take away* the reader’s acknowledgement that the setting is a common one, if that setting becomes too detailed and thus too peculiar. It would also distract both writer and reader from the puzzle: Van Dine thus forbade all descriptions except functional ones for fear that the novel might focus too much on issues other than the mystery itself. In other words, the setting has to be described specifically enough but to remain general enough for the reader to be able to picture it easily. This explains Christie’s lack of characterisation as far as settings are concerned, except when the setting already exists and thus must be recognized and individualised – as in

Orient Express, for instance. Christie preferred atmospheric characterisation – in spite of Van Dine’s recommendations – for it highlights a characteristic element of her closed circles of suspects: the suspects’ feelings. As shown in Part 3, these feelings are often fear and suspicion and explain the characters’ actions, but they sometimes also reveal essential information about the murder: in *Styles*, for example, Hastings notices that while the suspects feel “shock and distress,” the victim’s personality makes it impossible for them to be overcome by grief – which in turn means that none of the suspects might have been held back from murdering her (Christie 2007, 59).

In many ways, Christie’s novels embody the Golden Age: not only did it begin with the publication of *Styles* (Cook 2011, 87) but this very novel started many of its codes, especially that of the closed circle. Sanja Matković calls *Christmas* an example of the Golden Age conventions (Matković 2018, 445). Given that Christie stands at the basis of the classic formula of detective fiction – because other writers after her followed her formula and because she was the most successful sales-wise –, it would be interesting to compare her writing of enclosure with that of other authors from the Golden Age. These differences and convergences may enlighten us on the choices made in Christie’s model.

1.4.2. John Dickson Carr, the master of enclosure

Numerous writers followed the closed circle trend set by Christie: one could mention Dorothy L. Sayers, Ngaio Marsh, Margery Allingham, J. Jefferson Farjeon, Mary Roberts Rinehart and many others. Nevertheless, the contemporary whose influence on Christie was the most important – especially as regards matters of enclosure – was mostly known for his locked room stories, rather than for his use of the closed circle ploy.

John Dickson Carr¹⁷ was one of the most prominent writers of the Golden Age, along with Christie, and a master of the locked-room mystery initially invented by Poe (see Part 1.1.1.) and developed by many writers afterwards (see Parts 1.2.2. and 1.3.1.). He was also one of the rare authors capable of surprising Christie: the covers of many of Carr’s works (including, for example, *The Burning Court*) feature a quote of hers reading “Very few detective stories baffle me nowadays, but Mr Carr’s always do.” Several of her lists of favourite books include Carr’s works (Curran 2011, 408-414), and Curran notices that *The Burning Court* is a clue to Linda’s secret in *Evil Under the Sun* (*ibid.*, 409). *The Burning Court* also presents similarities

¹⁷ Carr used many pseudonyms and was also known as Carter Dickson or Carr Dickson. To simplify matters, I will call him by his given name throughout this analysis.

with several of Christie's later works: the guilty nurse who uses a false identity to hide that she has a history with the family is a motif that is found in Christie's *Sad Cypress*. As Christie and Carr wrote their novels during the same time span, this intertextuality reveals that they influenced each other's writing.

It must be admitted that Carr's works make very little use (if any) of Christie's beloved closed circle of suspects. In *The Burning Court*, for instance, the identification of a small group of suspects depends not on physical enclosure but on (questionable) deductions: only someone who was a familiar of the house could have poisoned Miles Despard on the long term, known what beverage he would have accepted to drink, made an exact replica of Lucy's dress, and stolen the nurse's medicine. It is even truer given that all suspects were outside of the house when the murder occurred and that Marie Stevens, an outsider, can be considered a suspect. In Carr's novel, the delineation of a group of suspects relies on matters of judgment, whereas Christie's pattern of enclosure is objective, for it singles out a delimited, unquestionable number of suspects from the start.

Nevertheless, Carr's work on locked rooms and types of enclosure was of tremendous importance for Christie's novels. A first element of this work was the analysis of all possible solutions (a total of seven) to a locked room mystery: this study appeared in *The Hollow Man* (*The Three Coffins* in the U.S.) and was called "The Locked-Room Lecture." Several of these solutions were of use to Christie in her locked room mysteries: the fourth solution – suicide intended to look like murder – was the solution to "Murder in the Mews." The fifth solution (the murderer used impersonation to make people believe the victim was still alive when it was not the case) and the sixth one (the murderer seemed to be inside when he really was outside) are used in *Christmas* with a few alterations (Sugden uses a hidden device to make it sound as if the already dead victim was screaming instead of impersonating the victim himself). Solution number three (a mechanical device was hidden in the room to kill the victim) is thus used in a slightly altered form in *Christmas*, but also in *Murder in Mesopotamia* – a novel that also uses solution number six. The seventh solution (the victim looks dead but is actually killed later) is used in "The Idol House of Astarte." Finally, the second solution (the victim dies as a result of suggestion) is used on Vera Claythorne in *And Then There Were None*. Carr's extensive analysis of the locked room ploy gave Christie keys to create or solve her own locked room mysteries, although she always took care to adapt the solutions Carr gave – and, sometimes, to combine them, as in *Christmas*.¹⁸

¹⁸ Some of these solutions are used in closed circle mysteries rather than locked room ones: impersonation of the already dead victim in *After the Funeral*, murder committed after the body was found in *Evil Under the Sun*...

Carr's importance in the domain of enclosed settings does not end there, however, for he was also an innovator whose variations on the locked room ploy present striking similarities with Christie's sealed spaces. As Pierre Bayard noticed, the traditional setting for a locked room mystery – a hermetically sealed chamber – was limiting and came to lack in originality after being used by several authors. Carr consequently endeavoured to explore other options and to find more challenging settings for the locked room ploy – settings that would defy logic and make the crime look impossible, as this subgenre requires. For Bayard, this results either in reducing or in expanding the space of the crime (Bayard 2019, 72).

The reduction of space consists in finding a locale even smaller than a room, like an elevator (*Drop to his Death*) or a phone booth (a problem that Carr was unable to find a satisfying solution to and that was eventually solved by his friend Clayton Rawson – Bayard 2011, 72; Combes 1989, 82). However, Carr preferred the expansion of space to its reduction. In *He Who Whispers*, a man is murdered in an isolated tower that was continuously watched by several witnesses who saw no one get in or out¹⁹; a similar pattern is used in *A Graveyard to Let*, in which a man seemingly vanishes into thin air in front of several witnesses. Christie used this technique as well in several of her closed circle mysteries: in *Cards on the Table*, *Murder in Mesopotamia*, *Appointment with Death*, *Death in the Clouds*, “The Idol House of Astarte” and *Three Act Tragedy*, murders are committed in front of unsuspecting witnesses. More strikingly, Bayard notices that this approach is employed in *And Then There Were None*. Not only is the island cut off from the world, but everyone's eyes were on it, guaranteeing that no one entered or left it (Bayard 2019, 74):

“The signals were seen by a party of boy scouts on the morning of the 11th. There was no possibility of getting out there that day. The men got there on the afternoon of the 12th at the first moment possible to run a boat ashore there. They're all quite positive that nobody could have left the island before they got there. There was a big sea on after the storm.”

“Couldn't someone have swum ashore?”

“It's over a mile to the coast and there were heavy seas and big breakers inshore. And there were a lot of people, boy scouts and others on the cliffs looking out towards the island and watching.” (Christie 2011, 274)

Even though the onlookers are too far to be able to witness the events, they can clearly see that no one came in or out of the island. The island is thus a locked room, whose enclosure is guaranteed at three levels: by its isolation, by the weather and by onlookers that can assert its complete lockdown.

¹⁹ The crime that seems impossible because it was committed in front of several witnesses who saw nothing already appeared in G.K. Chesterton's “The Oracle of the Dog.” Carr admired Chesterton and probably took inspiration from him.

Complete isolation is another technique used by Carr. In *The Problem of the Wire Cage* the body is located on a surface where there should be footprints (a tennis court to be precise) and yet there are none, which points to an impossibility: the victim was murdered but no one could have come near him. In *The White Priory Murders*, the corpse is surrounded by snow and yet there is only a set of approaching footprints – and none indicating that the murderer left. A similar trick relying on weather is essential to Christie's *Orient Express*:

“Then it seems,” said Poirot slowly, “as though we must look for our murderer in the Istanbul-Calais coach.” He turned to the doctor. “That is what you were hinting, I think?” The Greek nodded. “At half an hour after midnight we ran into the snowdrift. No one can have left the train since then.”

M. Bouc said solemnly.

“*The murderer is with us – on the train now ...*” (Christie 2001c, 68)

This points to the fundamental difference between Christie and Carr. In Carr's novels, the witnesses' constant guard and the complete isolation of the victim are meant to create a feeling of impossibility and a challenge to logic. In Christie's, however, the very same techniques are used to lock down the suspects rather than the victim, indicating that Christie is more interested in characters than in logical impossibilities. These ploys guarantee that the circle of suspects is completely closed: no one could have entered or left the island in *And Then There Were None* or the train in *Orient Express*, which means that the murderer must necessarily be inside. In other words, the enclosure and isolation in Christie's novels are not only guaranteed by physical boundaries, but also by elements such as the circumstances of the crime, the weather, the presence of onlookers and the joint experience of all suspects who can guarantee the isolation of the setting (as in *And Then There Were None*, in which the victims check whether or not there are other people on the island). The presence of onlookers (or trustful witnesses, as in *Orient Express*) underlines the process of double enclosure, as it means that the suspects' enclosure is not only geographical or topographical but also social to a certain extent. It is not enough that the setting be closed and marked off from the rest of the world: the isolation is only complete if a social community recognizes this characteristic.

As was underlined in Part 1.4.1, the circumstances of this isolation are sometimes judged unlikely or downright impossible by critics. Carr is no exception to this rule, although his solutions are more improbable than his premises (the solution of *The Problem of the Wire Cage* is one of those). Even though verisimilitude is more important than actual realism, as was stated by Bargainnier, this leads to wonder about realism in Carr's (and Christie's) works.

It is interesting to notice that Carr's novels often play with the supernatural: in *The Hollow Man*, for instance, discussions on magic are rife, which is fitting for a subgenre that plays on

the apparent impossibility of an event. This supernatural atmosphere is reinforced by the author's love of Gothic descriptions inspired by Poe's (Cook 2011, 96). All talks of the supernatural are dismissed in the end by the detective's rational explanation. However, *The Burning Court* features an important supernatural subplot: a woman that seems to have walked right through a wall, a method of poisoning reminiscent of that of witches in the 17th century, and another woman who looks like one of these witches. At the end, two solutions are given to the reader: one that is strictly rational, and one that is strictly supernatural. The beauty of this ending is that each solution answers elements that feel slightly off or unexplained in the other.

The scene of the crypt in *The Burning Court* (1937) perfectly embodies the supernatural atmosphere and the feeling of impossibility that pervade Carr's locked room stories. In *The Burning Court*, Mark Despard suspects that his uncle Miles was killed; but as he has no proof and would rather avoid a scandal if his suspicions are proven true, he decides to unbury Miles' body with two of his friends at night, in the utmost secret. The chapter when the three men penetrate the crypt in order to dig up and open the coffin is pervaded with a Gothic atmosphere:

The enclosure of the little staircase, although damp, was completely free from marshiness. Its close air pressed the lungs with almost a feeling of warmth. At the foot of the stairs was a rounded archway, with a rotted wooden door hanging from its frame, opening into the crypt; and a heavier air stirred at their coming. The beam of Mark's flashlight moved inside. That crypt had been opened only ten days ago: which, Stevens thought, made it easier to go into now. Its damp closeness was still thick with an overpowering odor of flowers.

Mark's light showed a mausoleum oblong in shape, some twenty-five feet long by fifteen feet wide, and built throughout of massive granite blocks. In the centre an octagonal granite pillar supported the groined roof. [...] Near the top, where the old Despards lay, most of the niches were ornamented with marble facings, scrollwork, a contorted angel or two, even a Latin eulogy; but lower down they became more severe. Some tiers were filled, some almost empty; and eight coffins could be laid along one tier. (Carr 1985, 53)

This excerpt emphasises a claustrophobic feeling of entrapment – or, more exactly, of entombment, which is after all fitting for a crypt. First, the narrator underlines the closed (“enclosure,” “close air,” “closeness”) and small (“the little staircase”) nature of the crypt, a enclosure made more obvious by the presence of oppressive granite blocks that restrict the space even more. The insistence on the low quality of air further highlights the discomfort of being in such a small, closed space: not only is the air “close” and “heav[y],” it is also saturated with various smells, and the space is invaded by dampness (mentioned twice) and decomposition (“rotted”). This decomposition reflects the very nature of the crypt (which is to

contain dead people), but also the transgressive quality of what the three characters are doing. The violation they are committing is emphasized by the “severe” presence of religious objects – angel statues, eulogies, etc.

This Gothic crypt soon becomes a locked room scene as well. Indeed, the characters soon discover that Miles Despard’s coffin is empty: “The coffin, bedded with white satin, gleamed under the shaking light in Henderson’s hand; but it was empty. There was not even a pinch of dust” (*ibid.*, 54). The mystery is complete; indeed,

We've not only got to explain how a murderer got in and out of a locked room without disturbing anything: because it wasn't only a locked room. It was worse. It was a crypt built of granite, without even the advantage of a window; and closed up not by a door, but by a stone slab weighing nearly half a ton, six inches of soil and gravel, and a concrete-sealed pavement which one witness is willing to swear has not been disturbed. (*ibid.*, 60)

Carr accumulates several layers of enclosure in order to emphasise the sheer impossibility of the mystery. The disappearance of the body is impossible to explain logically. Only three possibilities are left: there is a secret entrance to the crypt (that the characters fail to find), one of the three men hid the body at a moment when the other two were not looking (which is the ‘rational’ solution to the mystery at the end of the book, even though this solution seems far-fetched and thus unsatisfying), or the dead body walked out of its own tomb (unless it was retrieved by magic; this is something that even the ‘supernatural’ solution does not explain, thus creating doubt as to which is the ‘real’ solution out of the two).

In effect, the scene of the crypt embodies the writing of locked rooms in the Golden Age. The locked room plot has changed considerably since “Murders in the Rue Morgue”: Poe had used enclosure in order either to emphasise the triumph of logic (in his ratiocination tales), or to illustrate the descent of a mind into madness (in his Gothic tales; see Part 1.1.2.). In Carr’s and Christie’s days, locked rooms are a genre of their own, modeled after Poe’s, Doyle’s, and Leroux’s own locked room stories (and those of a few other authors; Sheridan Le Fanu in particular comes to mind). The scene of the crypt is the perfect illustration of a genre for which enclosure is synonymous with logical impossibility: enclosure aims to create cognitive dissonance between what seems logical (the fact that no one could enter or leave the room) and what happened (someone did come in or out). In doing so, the genre irrevocably intertwines with the supernatural and the Gothic. The genre is connected with the supernatural because the lack of logical explanation must mean that the solution is irrational and paranormal (as evidenced in *The Burning Court*, in which the rational solution and the supernatural one are equally possible, which creates the exact jarring effect that the locked room story seeks to create in the reader). Gothic evocations are omnipresent too: by making

the locked room the place where the victim is to die through seemingly monstrous means (the locked room is, in that sense, the victim's tomb), the genre always evokes the themes of violation, transgression, taboo, and entombment (see 1.3.2.).

At first sight, Christie's closed circles seem different: her solutions are always eminently rational and the supernatural solution is rarely even mentioned by the characters. In fact, Christie's enclosure does not create impossibility, but *an array of possibilities*. However, is that enclosure any more reassuring than Carr's? The enclosed setting can still become the victim's tomb (as is the case in *None*); Gothic elements are still found in her novels (see 1.1.2.); and the enclosed setting is haunted by a presence that the characters cannot identify.

Nevertheless, Gothic and supernatural elements are astonishingly important in Carr's writings – more so than in most locked room stories, which usually emphasise logic and rationality like Poe did in “Rue Morgue.” In fact, Carr's relationship with realism is noteworthy:

From the very beginning of his writing career Carr railed against realism; in 1922, at the age of 15, he published a polemic against realistic writers claiming that they ‘rob life of all that is beautiful.’ Carr assiduously resisted any temptation to write in the manner of the hard-boiled novel. (Cook 2011, 93)

This affirmation seems preposterous at first, for Carr located his novels in realistic-looking settings and, with the exception of *The Burning Court*, relied only on the rational. He included detailed plans and descriptions in his novels and several of his solutions relied on a room's topography (as in *The Hollow Man*, or *The Burning Court* for the rational solution). Carr sometimes even wrote about real settings, such as the Tower of London in *The Mad Hatter Mystery*. But, according to Michael E. Grost, this specific novel belongs to Carr's débuts, when he was writing in the Realist school tradition (Grost, “John Dickson Carr,” n.d.).

Grost presents a distinction between two schools of the classical detective fiction: the Realist school on the one hand, and the Intuitionist school on the other. The Realist school paid enormous attention to “a realistic portrayal of various *institutions, especially businesses*, but also universities, clubs, ships, trains, and the police themselves” as well as their day-to-day experience, and “on *deduction from physical evidence*, such as footprints, tire marks, smudges on walls, marks on shoes, etc.” (Grost, “The Realistic School of Detective Fiction,” n.d.). Alibis were of prime importance and authors relied heavily on timetables and diagrams, and, as Christie herself said in a tongue-in-cheek manner, “the railway timetable, the bus routes, the plans of the cross country roads” (Christie 1976, 117). Both Christie and Carr, on the other hand, belonged to the Intuitionist school. This school focused on “crimes solved by pure thinking,” the “movements of characters around [the] crime scene, the “personal

motives” and the characters’ private sphere as well as the “ambiguous relationships between suspects” (Grost, “The Realistic School of Detective Fiction,” n.d.).

As a consequence, Intuitionists handled enclosed mysteries differently than Realists did, for they focused on the characters’ psychology and on their private sphere rather than on purely mathematical details. Maps and movements were important, but only as long as they revealed something about the characters: in *Orient Express*, for example, the map of the wagon is relevant because it indicates that Mrs Hubbard lied and is thus guilty. This means that, while the setting must *look* true to life, the “real life” does not matter, as in *Styles* in which the First World War rages on but has little to no consequence on the characters. In other words, “[t]his abstraction from the world creates an environment where concentration on the mystery of the crime assumes overriding importance” (Cook 2011, 95). The locked room, by virtue of its being in a detective novel and of being locked, is

twice removed from reality. This double departure arises from the fact that the detective novel takes place in a world apart from the everyday, and the locked room, by virtue of its inaccessibility, merely compounds this sense of isolation. (*ibid.*)

Because it shares the same constituents than the locked room, the same can be said about the closed circle of suspects: no matter how verisimilar it looks, it is a half-fabulous world where the mystery is all and the detective will inevitably bring back order.

This comparison between Christie and Carr allows us to note the points of convergence and divergence between two of the most successful Golden Age writers. Carr and Christie both extended enclosure to spaces wider and more isolated than usual locked settings. However, Carr’s focus was on logical impossibility, while Christie used closed circles to stress social relations. In spite of this difference, both authors shared a common disregard for realism and preferred to focus on the characters and to make their settings look verisimilar (i.e. familiar to the reader) instead of emphasising scientific exactitude. This comparison thus highlights that the role of spatial enclosure in Christie’s works is primarily to give clues about the characters and to isolate them in order to create suspense and tension.

Conclusion to Chapter One

This analysis of the uses of enclosure in the works of Christie's predecessors and fellow crime writers has shown that, while Christie's technique of double enclosure was innovative within the detective genre, it nevertheless finds its origins in the history and evolution of the genre. In the mid-nineteenth century, the first detective stories were already closely associated with spatial enclosure: not only did Edgar Allan Poe invent the trope of the murder committed in a locked room, but physical enclosure was already an essential component of his Gothic stories. For Poe, spatial enclosure meant to highlight the horrific confrontation of the protagonist with the most shadowy parts of his self. As a result, in his Gothic as in his ratiocination tales, the inside was a claustrophobic place of chaos – while the outside was the place for reader and order. While Sir Arthur Conan Doyle never quite focused on enclosed spaces *per se*, his version of the structure laid by Poe steered detective fiction towards a focus on the social aspect of crime. Doyle reinforced the idea of a boundary between the inside and the outside – a boundary not only physical, but also *social* –, popularised murders within the family circle in country mansions where the study of one's interiority gave the most important clues, and suggested that physical distance from civilisation was a main factor leading to criminality. In turn, Leroux used these ingredients to create a first, rudimentary version of the closed circle of suspects. Leroux focused as much on physical enclosure as on social enclosure and the consequences of both: he depicted groups of suspects haunted by an atmosphere of terror and paranoia due to the certainty that the murderer had managed to infiltrate their group. This evolution of the genre meant that Christie, when she started writing, saw spatial and social enclosure as a feature of the genre, but also as a potentiality that was yet to be developed. The requirements of the Golden Age of Detective Fiction – such as fair play and verisimilitude – gave her the incentive to expand on this latent potential and establish the closed circle formula, and led her to explore all possible variations of spatial enclosure, most notably with the help and influence of fellow writer John Dickson Carr.

While Agatha Christie was thus certainly not the first to use enclosure as a device, she used it under specific conditions and for specific purposes that made her unique. The first step to understand her personal use of enclosure and of the closed circle ploy should now be to examine the first half of her process of double enclosure, the one that was developed first in the history of the genre: physical, i.e. spatial, enclosure.

Chapter Two: The physical delineation of the closed circle

As I have explained before, the closed circle technique relies both on spatial enclosure and on social enclosure. Now that I have analysed why Agatha Christie came to use the closed circle method time and again in her novels and how the writers who came before her influenced this choice, it is time to examine the notion of physical enclosure within her mysteries. Indeed, the first chapter of this *mémoire* raised several questions regarding the way spatial enclosure is achieved, its necessity, and its role in the narrative. How does the author accomplish the physical delineation of a group of suspects? How does the setting work in relation to enclosure? What are the characteristics of Christie's enclosed settings? How essential are maps and physical details in regard to the solving of the murder? Can physically trapping the characters look realistic? Why choose complete isolation and what does it reveal about the enclosed group?

In order to answer these questions, this second chapter will first analyse the enclosure process itself and how the setting plays a role in this process: this part will examine how physical enclosure is achieved and how it works with Christie's choice of settings, as well as the consequences of this choice on the mystery. This will lead, in a second part, to a study of Christie's closed settings and their characteristics. This part will study the artificiality of the process of enclosure and determine the importance of realism in Christie's closed circles; it will notably examine the textual characterisation of the settings, but also the role of the maps Christie so often adds in her closed circle mysteries. Finally, a third and final part will turn to the notion of isolation that is so prominent in Christie's closed circle novels: the final part of this chapter will examine why seclusion is so important to Christie's stories and its effects on the closed circle of characters.

2.1. The closed setting

2.1.1. The process of enclosure

In order to understand how the process of double enclosure works in Christie's novels, it is necessary to analyse how she encloses the suspects, spatially speaking – that is to say, how she confines the mystery to a restricted, sealed space that can be used to contain and single out a finite number of suspects.

In my first chapter, I have mentioned several times the similarities between the closed circle technique and the locked room mystery: not only is the process of enclosure in Christie's closed circles relatively similar to that of Edgar Allan Poe's locked rooms, but Christie drew inspiration from John Dickson Carr's work on locked rooms to invent the structure of her own closed settings. Additionally, Gaston Leroux's primitive closed circles – that were such an inspiration for her – were all locked rooms of a kind – such is the case of the “bout de cour” episode, for instance.

Indeed, closed circles – and especially Christie's – rely on a basis similar to that of locked rooms as far as the sealing of space is concerned:

Les deux espaces séparés par la courbe diffèrent en ce que l'un est *borné*, et l'autre *non borné* ; le premier est appelé la partie du plan *intérieure* à la courbe, et le second la partie *extérieure* à la courbe. [...] En revanche, pour passer de l'intérieur à l'extérieur, il faut passer la *frontière*, qui est la courbe elle-même [...]. (Descotes 2015, 34)

Descotes's definition of the two types of space involved in a locked room also defines the dynamics at hand in the closed circle narrative: just as in a locked room story, the closed circle story consists of a bounded space the limits of which are neatly marked out. This underlines the opposition between the closed circle – within the boundaries – and the rest of the world. In fact, the only character that breaks through that boundary is but the detective and his or her helpers such as an assistant. While the closed circle story is not interested in the crossing from the bounded space to the unbounded one, Descotes's notion of a physical boundary separating the two – and thus ensuring enclosure – is relevant to Christie's closed circles. Descotes further explains about the locked room mystery:

Les parois de la chambre sont figurées par la courbe qui sépare l'intérieur et l'extérieur. [...] Mais la courbe frontière ne comporte pas de trou, car elle est supposée continue. [...] Comme la chambre est supposée hermétiquement fermée, sans ouverture praticable, il n'est donc pas possible que l'assassin passe par un trou. (*ibid.*, 35)

Here again, the closed circle works similarly to the locked room mystery: the closed circle is delineated by a physical border, and because its border is continuous – i.e. it contains no hole

that would allow an outsider to sneak in, kill the victim, and sneak out – then the murderer is necessarily to be found within the enclosed setting. Of course, one major difference between these two types of mystery is that locked rooms lay emphasis on the apparent impossibility of the murder, while closed circles seem impossible to solve because there are *too many* possible explanations, what with the fact that every character is equally suspect. Another major difference between the two is that, while the locked room seems hermetically closed, it is *not*, and the detective and the reader have to find the small aperture in the boundary that allowed the murderer to get in and out: in “Rue Morgue” and “The Speckled Band” for instance, there is a window or a hole that, while it cannot let a human through, can be used by an animal, and in *The Burning Court* the room was made to look like it was closed even though it was opened. The trick can also consist in having the murder occur before the room was locked, or in having an accident occur at the same time, both of which happen in *Chambre jaune*: these options allow for the boundary to remain intact, but they rely on tricks. The closed circle, on the other hand, requires the enclosure to be absolutely unquestionable. *None* and *Orient Express*, for instance, rely entirely on the fact that no one trespassed the boundary at any point of the story. The boundary contains no secret passage, it is not an illusion, and no trick enables characters to go in or out. The boundary needs to be absolutely impossible to trespass. In fact, one could argue that the closed circle is more sealed than the locked room. In that sense, the closed circle is not only a locked room of a kind, but perhaps also a culmination of the locked room mystery, in which all the constitutive elements of the mystery – from the victim and the clues to the suspects, the murderer and the detective – are contained within one hermetically closed setting, very often without any intervention from the outside world. Indeed, in spite of the differences between the two, Descotes himself identifies the closed circle murder as a locked room mystery for this very reason:

Autre type de situation dans lequel la frontière est continue, où l’auteur a même tout intérêt à en renforcer autant qu’il le peut l’imperméabilité, sans que le problème du franchissement offre de difficulté : celui où il y a bien un être réel dans la chambre close, mais où il ne la quitte pas. (*ibid.*, 103)

The real question is thus to understand the nature of the boundary delineating the closed circle in Agatha Christie’s novels. Given that she wrote numerous closed circle mysteries, however, she had to challenge the reader in new, exciting ways, to explore new circle dynamics, and to avoid repetition – in other words, she had to vary and write about different types of enclosure. As a result, she used different types of boundaries.

A first technique consists in physically separating the entire setting from the rest of the world. In other words, the setting is completely isolated from a geographical point of view,

meaning that no outsider could have sneaked his or her way in. In addition, this technique also ensures that the characters will remain undisturbed by any outside event, which can be a source of danger and anguish since no one will come and save the trapped characters, as in *None*. However, it also has the added advantage of adding more suspense to the mystery: since the characters cannot verify the identities of the suspects, the reader cannot take anything for granted and must only rely on the suspects' declarations and on the clues available. In short, isolation makes the mystery confined and focused, which is perhaps why Christie used this technique so much. In *Orient Express*, she seems to consider it the ideal condition for a detective story:

[Speaking to Poirot] 'I know your reputation. I know something of your methods. This is the ideal case for you. To look up the antecedents of all these people, to discover their *bona fides*—all that takes time and endless inconvenience. But have I not heard you say often that to solve a case a man has only to lie back in his chair and think? Do that. Interview the passengers on the train, view the body, examine what clues there are, and then—well, I have faith in you! I am assured that it is no idle boast of yours. Lie back and think—use (as I have heard you say so often) the little grey cells of the mind—and you will *know!*' (Christie 2001c, 64-65)

'What to my mind is so interesting in this case is that we have none of the facilities afforded to the police. We cannot investigate the *bona fides* of any of these people. We have to rely solely on deduction. That, to me, makes the matter very much more interesting. There is no routine work. It is all a matter of the intellect.' (*ibid.*, 216)

I have underlined in 1.4.1. that the Golden Age's golden rule was fair play. With this type of enclosure, the reader is on equal footing with the detective, who will be unable to pull out secret information out of his bag; both the detective and the reader playing at being a detective only have to "lie back in [their] chair and think." Because it forbids any resort to external information, the closed circle mystery is the logical fulfilment of the whodunit.

In Christie's novels, isolation is usually accomplished through two different methods: either remoteness, or loss of communication with the outside world. Remoteness consists in locating the setting in a place so far away from human civilisation that it becomes impossible to reach. In this specific case, one could say that the setting – that becomes bounded not by a physical limit, but by its being surrounded by nothing, by emptiness – does not actually possess a boundary. This method is used in several novels. In *None*, Soldier Island is far from the coast. In *Mesopotamia*, the house is located in the desert – it is possible to access it, but it is not easy. The most isolated setting Christie used, however, is the plane in *Death in the Clouds*: the simple fact that the murder was committed mid-air restricts the circle to the passengers of the plane. The second method – loss of communication – is usually achieved by using extreme weather to cut off the setting from the world. The storm in *None* prevents the

suspects from leaving the island and from contacting people on the coast, and prevents anyone from coming on the island to save them. In *Orient Express*, the snow reveals that no one left the train, since there are no footprints. In *The Mousetrap*, the people in the house are unable to leave or to know more about the murderer they are trapped with. Isolation thus works in three different ways. First, it guarantees that the setting is efficiently delineated and thus closes the circle; secondly, it ensures that no one can get in or out at any point, even after the murder is committed, which is ideal for suspense; and finally, it ensures a lack of external disturbance that keeps the story focused, and a lack of external information that makes for the “fair play” the Golden Age writers wanted.

Another technique consists in locking the setting and making it hermetically sealed. This can be achieved through several types of boundaries, the first of which consists quite simply in having all doors and windows closed, thus preventing any outsider from entering the setting or leaving it. This technique is used in *Christmas* but also in *Orient Express*:

‘[...] All the doors are *locked* on the inside. [...] [They] are *bolted* as well.’ (Christie 2001a, 186)

‘There are two windows in the room, sir. One was *closed* and *locked*. The other was open a few inches at the bottom – but it was fixed in that position by a burglar screw, and moreover, I’ve tried it and it’s *stuck* fast – *hasn’t been opened* for years, I should say. Also the wall outside is quite smooth and *unbroken* – no ivy or creepers. I don’t see how anyone could have left that way.’ (*ibid.*, 112-113)

‘If the murderer did not escape through the window, and if this communicating door was *bolted* on the other side, and if the door into the corridor was not only *locked* on the inside but *chained*, how then did the murderer leave the compartment?’ (Christie 2001c, 92)

All the emphases in these extracts are mine; they highlight the omnipresence of the vocabulary of enclosure in this type of novel, but also the *certainty* of its space being closed: it is not simply locked but “stuck,” “bolted” and “chained”. When Christie uses this style of enclosure, she usually devotes some time not only to prove, but insist on the locked nature of the setting. In *Orient Express* for instance, no less than three witnesses (McQueen, Hardman and Michel, respectively) testify that every single door opening on the outside of the train compartment was fastened during – and even before – the night of the murder. When she uses this kind of enclosure, Christie thus makes sure that the boundary locking the setting is – to use her own words – a “wall [...] quite smooth and unbroken” that no one could have possibly forced their way through.

Another method of locking – that I have already mentioned in relation to Carr’s writings – consists in providing external proof that the circle comprises only the characters that were

within a certain perimeter. For example, outside, reliable witnesses attest that no one entered the setting, meaning that the murderer was already inside. This technique is best explained in *Murder in Mesopotamia*:

[...] No, there is only one way into this room – *through the door*. And there is only one way to the door *through the courtyard*. And there is only one entrance to the courtyard – *through the archway*. And outside the archway there were five people and they all tell the same story, and I do not think, me, that they are lying . . . No, they are not lying. They are not bribed to silence. *The murderer was here...* (Christie 2001b, 176; emphasis in the original)

‘That, of course, has been the difficulty,’ said Poirot. ‘The evidence of the servants that *no one entered the courtyard from outside*. [...]’ (*ibid.*, 316; emphasis in the original)

The impermeability of the boundary, here, is guaranteed by several factors: there are *several* witnesses; their stories are identical; they are trustworthy; they have no reason to lie. If all these criteria are met, the boundary is solid and continuous. Christie uses this technique several times. In *None*, for instance, people on the coast watched the island at all times – as they were aware that something was off – and are positive that no boat moored on its shore (see 1.4.2.). Similarly, in *Sparkling Cyanide* Colonel Race devotes some time to interrogating the servers and clients of the restaurant who all attest that no one (or at least no one suspicious) went near the table where George Barton died. Physical clues can be used instead of witnesses: in *Orient Express*, for instance, Poirot knows that the murderer is an insider because the train was snowbound during the murder, and yet there are no footprints in the snow. The same technique is used in “The Incredible Theft,” albeit with mud instead of snow.

An analogous process consists in having *inside* witnesses confirming that no one entered the setting while the suspects were gathered, as in *Mesopotamia*:

[...] To have got into your wife’s room, a stranger *must* have come through the arched doorway into the courtyard. But we have the united assurance of the guard, the cook and the house-boy that *nobody did so.*’ (*ibid.*, 116)

Christie uses this system rather regularly: in *Mesopotamia*, *Cards on the Table*, *Three Act Tragedy*, *A Murder is Announced*, *Death on the Nile*, *Death in the Clouds* (while the circle is already restricted to the passengers of the plane, it is narrowed down again to a certain compartment), *Sparkling Cyanide* (regarding the murder of Rosemary) and several others. The most striking feature of this technique is that it very often consists in a public murder: the victim is killed in front of all the suspects – and even sometimes of the detective – who see nothing, making “the manner of the crime [...] one of unparalleled audacity” (Christie 2015, 48). While this characteristic makes it evident that the murderer was “one of us,” this poses a

supplementary challenge to the detective, who must solve the “how” in addition to the “who.” This also fuels suspicion and distrust among the closed circle (see Chapter Three).

A very similar type of boundary consists in writing the plot so that only someone who was in a certain place at a certain moment of time – that does not correspond to the moment of the crime itself – could have committed the murder. This means of enclosure is particularly used in *Styles*, in which no one can be sure of the moment Emily Inglethorp was poisoned. If it was the coffee that was poisoned, then only the characters who were taking it with Mrs Inglethorp in the evening are suspects. Similarly, only someone who was in the house when the locked despatch-case was stolen could have taken it. However, after this first novel, Christie seems to prefer writing novels in which enclosure delineates an unchanging number of suspects – that is to say, circles that are closed when the murder is committed, and cannot be questioned.²⁰

Styles also makes use of a process of enclosure that Christie uses rarely for this very reason: revealing that the murderer is a familiar of the house because only someone who knew the victim’s intimate habits can be guilty. Indeed, at the end of the book, it is revealed that it was Mrs Inglethorp’s medication that had been poisoned; Alfred Inglethorp and Evie were able to poison her only because they knew her well. Another method that Christie only uses once is the argument of authority: in *Curtain*, the reader and Hastings know that the murderer lives in Styles only because Poirot asserts that it is the case. In both these cases, the boundary is not physical but virtual. It delineates a closed circle of suspects all the same (in *Styles*, this last-minute change in the nature of the boundary does not change much compared to the investigation process, since both boundaries delineate an intimate circle). However, one could argue that the boundary being virtual makes it flimsy, whereas a physical process of enclosure appears less questionable – which is probably why Christie did not use it a lot, and seemed to prefer using physical types of enclosure.

A final type of enclosure that is not material *per se* but that is essential to the workings of the closed circle is time. The murder needs to be clearly framed in time in order to narrow down the closed circle. The victim was alive at a certain point in time; he or she was not at another; all the characters that were *in situ* between these two moments belong in the circle. This type of boundary does not rely on physical elements, contrary to most other types of

²⁰ Christie notably uses this technique again in *After the Funeral*. In this novel, only those who were at the funeral and heard Cora assert that Richard’s death was a murder could have killed her... in theory. In truth, Cora was already dead and was being impersonated by her murderess who wanted Cora’s family to be suspected of her murder. The fact that this closed circle is but a trick points out to the reservations Christie seemed to have about this manner of enclosure: in both this novel and *Styles*, Miss Gilchrist and Evie Howard do not need to *actually* be in the circle to commit the murder, because the moment that supposedly closed the circle was only a set-up.

boundaries, but it encloses the suspects all the same. To simplify matters – and because she was aware that time can be unreliable, as we saw earlier on – Christie often chose a short window of time, that usually corresponds to a particular occasion: a flight (*Clouds*), a party (*Sparkling Cyanide*, *Cards*), a single afternoon or evening (*Mesopotamia*, *Styles*)... This type of boundary is so important that it occurs in every one of Christie's closed circle novels, in addition to all other types of boundaries she uses. Indeed, according to Ewers, Christie "freezeframes" her settings (Ewers 2016, 103): the setting is suspended in time. This suspension is best illustrated in *Orient Express*:

The murder has frozen the train in time, and it is not until Poirot can correctly restore the chronology of events that the clock can be wound up again, life can go on, and the train is able to resume its journey. [...] While Poirot's tabular mind moves forward in order to recreate a scene that has already occurred, the train itself – a symbol of motion – is held in stasis. [...] By arresting the movement of the train Christie [lets] Poirot [...] free to roam through the space of the train at his leisure. (*ibid.*, 103-4)

The enclosing of the story into a restricted window of time in which the story is confined effectively obliterates the rest of the world – thus participating in the story's isolation. While the rest of the world keeps going on at a normal pace, the enclosed setting remains static. In effect, the characters cannot move on (literally, in the case of *Orient Express*). The characters are instead forced to remember every single moment of the window of time during which the murder occurred: they are frozen in a retrospective of the murder, forced to focus on a clearly delimited moment in time, and to trace their own movements for the detective to reconstitute what happened – a phenomenon emphasised in *Five Little Pigs*, where Poirot asks the five suspects to remember a very specific couple of hours dating from twenty years prior. Knight observes that there is in Christie's closed circles "an objectified sense of time and place" (Knight 1980, 119): "an objectified sense of place in the use of maps and plans as well as the importance of an objectified sense of time in the proliferation of times, clocks, timetables, and alibis" (Scaggs 2005, 51). "The relation of people in time and place is usually the central issue in Christie" (Knight 1980, 120): this is particularly striking in the way maps represent not the setting as it usually is, but the setting as it was at the moment of the murder (in Annex D, Emily Inglethorp's room is represented as it was found after her death, coffee stain and overturned furniture included). In other words, temporal enclosure and spatial enclosure always work together. Indeed, temporal enclosure occurs in every closed circle, and always *in addition to* physical enclosure: enclosure requires a specific time stretch within a given place. In other words, enclosure can only occur if a space is physically bounded *at a delineated*

point in time; and the suspects can be identified only if the detective knows which characters were (or were not) in the setting at this precisely delimited point in time.

My reader has probably noticed that most of these different types of enclosure – with the exception of those that Christie barely used – have a locked room mystery equivalent. The setting that is hermetically sealed because it is locked, for instance, corresponds to the typical locked room mystery as it is written in *Christmas* or *Mesopotamia*. The isolated setting corresponds to the locked room mystery in which no one apparently went near the victim – not unlike *Clouds*, in which no one seemed to have approached Mme Giselle. The setting that was being watched has its locked room equivalent – as in *Mesopotamia*, in which Amy Leatheran, the nurse and narrator, stood vigil in front of the door. The murder committed in public is a classic locked room ploy; time is an inherent component of this type of mysteries.

Another similarity is that Christie plays with her boundary in the same way that locked room writers do. For instance, she sometimes plays with time. Similarly to the locked room murder happening before or after the room in question was closed, some murders in Christie's novels happen at a different time from what the characters and readers imagine: for instance in *Christmas* Simeon Lee was actually killed a few hours before his children heard what they thought was his being murdered. This information – that the reader can figure out – adds one person to the circle of suspects: Sugden, who came into the house at some point during the day. This is another shared trick between Christie and locked room writers such as Carr: playing with the width and shape of the boundary. Descotes explains it as follows:

Toujours en se plaçant dans l'hypothèse d'une frontière vraiment continue, les auteurs peuvent jouer sur la ligne de frontière elle-même, son existence, sa forme, sa situation et ses différentes fonctions. [...] Une autre possibilité qu'offre la manipulation de la ligne frontière consiste, toujours en maintenant sa continuité, à la placer au mauvais endroit, si bien qu'elle n'isole pas les personnages qu'elle paraît enfermer. (Descotes 2015, 118-123)

In other words, the boundary appears narrower than it really is. This is the case with Sugden: because the reader slightly misplaces the boundary, one character does not seem to be in the closed circle even though he or she should be. A variation on this trick consists in having the reader dismiss a character that *is* in the circle but seems inconspicuous, such as a servant for instance. In *Clouds*, Norman Gale – who is in the circle – dresses up as a steward to kill Mme Giselle; his accomplice sneaks up into the circle at some point, but as she is one of the suspects' maids, no one pays any attention to her. This variation is also used in several locked room stories (Descotes 2015, 30).

The enormous amount of resemblances between the locked room ploy and the closed circle, as well as their structural similarity, points out to the omnipresent pattern of enclosure in Agatha Christie's novels. Indeed, several of her closed circle novels contain a locked room element: it can be blatant – as in *Christmas* and *Mesopotamia*, that are textbook locked rooms – or more subtle: Mme Giselle or Shaitana (in *Cards*) being murdered in a full room even though no one approached them, could be the summary of a locked room novel, among many other examples. But this pattern of enclosure goes even further. It is very frequent in Christie's novels for the victim to be found in a room that is locked. In *Styles*, for instance, Emily Inglethorp is locked in as she dies, in spite of her family's efforts to break into her room. In *Orient Express*, Ratchett is found dead in a berth that is entirely locked except for the open window through which the murderer *cannot* have come in or out. This dimension of the plot is essential: it relies on the murderers coming through Mrs Hubbard's berth, which is capital in helping Poirot understand that Mrs Hubbard was in on it, and that all the passengers had a part in the murder. Almost all of Christie's closed circles feature enclosed settings embedded into each other: for instance, in *Orient Express*, Ratchett is found dead inside a locked room located inside a locked compartment that is itself contained within a much larger closed setting, the train, that is isolated from society.

As this last example proves, and as the astute reader probably noticed in my enumeration of the different types of boundaries Christie uses, this pattern of enclosure is all the more present as Christie tends to use several types of enclosure together. In *Christmas*, for instance, she has the house locked and inside witnesses attest that no outsider could have entered it. In *Mesopotamia*, she uses both inside witnesses and outside witnesses as well as the locked technique. In *None*, the island – a naturally locked, finite setting – is not only remote but cut away from the world by a storm. In these cases, enclosure is generally progressive: as the novel goes on, the characters are entrapped in a smaller and smaller world (as in *Orient Express*, in which the general setting of the train is progressively reduced to a single compartment) and/or more and more removed from civilisation, as is the case in *Orient Express*, but also in *None*, in which the island becomes more and more isolated as they discover that communication with the outside world is impossible and as a storm prevents them from leaving (*The Mousetrap* uses the exact same process.) Christie rarely uses only one method to enclose her suspects. Instead, she accumulates boundaries, which has several effects on the plot. On a purely practical level, the reader and the detective can be assured that the circle is hermetically sealed, since the setting is enclosed several times over. This Russian doll method also creates a foreshortening effect that helps keeping the story focused on a very

restricted, finite setting containing a very limited cast of characters, in a generally short window of time. This technique also creates an increasing atmosphere of isolation throughout the novel: each boundary removes the closed circle a little more from the rest of the world, until there are so many concentric layers enclosing the characters that they can no longer have any contact with the outside – this enhances suspense as the criminal is progressively closer and closer to the investigator, and it also creates a claustrophobic, anxiety-inducing atmosphere, as will be shown in Chapter Three of this *mémoire*.

It is interesting to notice, nevertheless, that these two features of Christie's closed circles – the omnipresence of patterns of enclosure and her accumulating several methods of enclosure – appeared progressively in Christie's works, as she refined her closed circle technique and explored various types of boundaries. Her first detective novel, *Styles*, presented a model of closed circle that had yet to be refined. In this novel Christie closed the circle of suspects by using techniques that made the circle flimsy and contestable, mainly because they did not rely on physical enclosure. As Christie grew more experienced in mystery writing, she experimented with new techniques and eventually established a formula for her closed circle mysteries. Her experiments mostly took place in the 1930s, a decade during which she wrote what critics consider to be her finest closed circles – *Orient Express*, *Tragedy*, *Clouds*, *Mesopotamia*, *Cards*, *Nile*, *Appointment*, *Christmas*, *None*. The first time she combined several closing techniques was in *Orient Express*, in which she made the setting explicitly locked, isolated, and frozen in time. Interestingly, *Orient Express* was written and published at a time when Christie turned to a more formal practice of the genre – i.e., a practice that was more in keeping with the standards of the Golden Age. Christie adopted a more formulaic writing, and wrote more closed circles. From then on, her closed circles had two defining, constant characteristics: they always accumulated several types of enclosure, and the setting was always closed at a certain point in time. She wrote, in short, closed circles the enclosure of which could not be questioned. During this decade, she also wrote closed circles that were more and more isolated from the rest of society: *Clouds*, *Mesopotamia* and *Appointment*, but also *None*. This was also the decade during which she tried out new types of settings (a plane, the desert, a boat...) and new types of enclosure, for instance the intervention of outside witnesses (seen for the first time in *Mesopotamia*) or inside witnesses (tried for the first time in *Tragedy*, then *Cards*). The culmination of her writing of enclosure is in 1939 with *None*, which cumulates every single technique of enclosure and makes *None* what is perhaps her ultimate closed circle. After that, she stopped experimenting with new forms of enclosure – perhaps because she felt she had written as many variations on physical enclosure as she

could – and she merely followed her established formula from this moment on. Her closed circles after that – starting with *Curtain*, written in the early 1940s despite being published in the 1970s – mostly consisted in exploring the nature of relationships within the closed circle and what leads to murder (*Towards Zero*, *Sparkling Cyanide*, *The Hollow*, *Crooked House*, *Ordeal by Innocence*), playing with the conventions of the genre (*A Murder is Announced*, *They Do It with Mirrors*), and experiencing with different types of closed circles that did not involve physical enclosure as much (*After the Funeral*, *A Pocket Full of Rye*, *4.50 from Paddington*: the last two involved murders that are not committed in a closed circle, but the investigation makes clear that only a group of people living in a particular restricted area could have done it).

This evolution in her writing allows us to define the physical characteristics of her closed circle with more precision. In order to provide a finite number of possible solutions, Christie must ensure that the setting itself is finite. This is attained by sealing the setting hermetically, usually by establishing physical limits that separate it – if only temporarily – from the rest of the world. The operating word, here, is *hermetically*: in order to make sure that the setting is effectively and undoubtedly bounded, Christie accumulates various types of enclosure. But the solid and continuous nature of the boundary depends, first and foremost, on the setting. The ideal setting for a closed circle mystery must have inherent boundaries, so that it is easy to lock and/or to isolate, and it must contain a limited number of people. For enclosure to be possible, the setting must thus be chosen carefully.

2.1.2. “Even if it is a tragedy – there, too, the décor must be correct²¹”: Christie’s choices of enclosed settings

In locked room mysteries, the nature of the locked room is an important component of the mystery: its size, its location, its organisation, its rules, its isolation or vicinity with other habitations or proximity to suspects are necessary to create the mystery but also to solve it. In closed circle mysteries, the nature of the enclosed setting is even more important. It is not simply that it must be physically circumscribed already; it is also that the setting of the enclosed murder will usually be the setting of the rest of the story too, as in the six novels of my corpus and most of Christie’s closed circles. The circle will remain in the setting (and sometimes be entrapped in it) not only before and during the murder but also after, during the investigation and the resolution. Even when the investigation process takes place outside of

²¹ Christie, *Appointment with Death*, 267.

the setting the characters were enclosed in, as in *Cards* or *Tragedy* or *Clouds*, the original enclosed setting is the key to the mystery.

While this study mainly focuses on Christie's enclosed settings, it is nevertheless fair to analyse all the components of her fictional spaces – that is to say, all of their levels. Ruth Ronen in her article “Space in Fiction” analyses fictional space as composed of three different, hierarchical levels: the setting, the frame, and the Frame. These different levels are combined according to a “topographical order” or “structure” and are related in various ways, the most prominent of which is “containment” (Ronen 1986, 432). This hierarchy is particularly relevant to Christie's fictional spaces, for it echoes her accumulating boundaries and enclosed spaces: indeed, according to Ronen, the setting is enclosed within a frame which is itself enclosed in a wider Frame (hence the capital letter) (*ibid.*, 433). This embedded topography, applied to Christie's novels, reveals that Christie's fictional spaces in closed circle mysteries are entirely based on containment: each level is clearly separated from the others, and there is little to no communication between them. The story usually remains confined to the setting, i.e. the smallest unit of space, and both frame and Frame are barely seen, and mostly serve to give the story an atmospheric element.

For this reason, I will briefly analyse frames and Frames – using Ronen's terminology – and focus more specifically on settings. My aim in this section is not to study the characteristics of each type of space used by Christie, but to connect these spaces to her writing of enclosure.

Let us start with the largest component of fictional space: Frames. They are “frames of reference” that describe a “stereotyped” situation, a representation of the world, more than an actual place used and seen in the story (*ibid.*, 432) – i.e., they are an “outer area – the spaces of other possible worlds incorporated into the narrative” (*ibid.*, 436). Christie mainly uses two frames: England, which is her default setting, (as in *Styles*, *Curtain*, *Christmas*, and *None*) and the Orient (see *Orient Express*, *Appointment*, *Mesopotamia*, and *Nile*). On occasion, she uses the Caribbean (*A Caribbean Mystery*) and the French Riviera (although never in a closed circle mystery). When in England, the specifics of the location she chooses are rarely known: we know that Soldier Island is in Devon and *Styles* is in Essex, but we know little more. In these novels, the Frame mainly conveys an impression of pastoral respectability, as in *Styles*:

As one looked out over the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost impossible to believe that, not so very far away, a great war was running its appointed course. (Christie 2007, 13)

The Orient, on the other hand, is more sinister. True to the Orientalist stereotypes and literary conventions of her time and place, Christie describes Oriental places as exotic and dreamlike and yet primitive. In *Mesopotamia*, these two Western views of the Orient coexist:

Very pretty it looked, too, before we got there from the other side of the river – standing up quite white and fairy-like with minarets. It was a bit different, though, when one had crossed the bridge and come right into it. Such a smell and everything ramshackle and tumble-down, and mud and mess everywhere. (Christie 2001b, 33)

It certainly was a beautiful sunset. Hassanieh in the distance looked quite fairy-like with the setting sun behind it, and the River Tigris flowing between its wide banks looked like a dream river rather than a real one. (*ibid.*, 57)

This description of Oriental places is paradoxical and rather upsetting: such places appear as escapist, yet the author emphasises their alleged inferiority when compared to the Western (and more precisely British) model. Whether the story takes place in Egypt, in Iraq, or in Syria, the impression is one of savagery, for instance in *Nile* and *Appointment*:

There was a savage aspect about the sheet of water in front of them [...] The whole scene had a melancholy, almost sinister charm. (Christie 2001d, 117)

All around and below stretched the blood-red rocks – a strange and unbelievable country unparalleled anywhere. Here in the exquisite pure morning air, they stood like gods, surveying a baser world – a world of flaring violence. [...] Here was, as the guide told them, the "Place of Sacrifice" – the "High Place." (Christie 1992, 117)

The atmosphere is one of strangeness, of “flaring violence” tainted by a colour red, like blood. The Orient is far away from civilisation, and as such, it is a place that awakens the basest instincts, the impulse to murder, to “sacrifice,” to behave as a god choosing who lives and who dies. Just after this excerpt, the narrator thinks that were it not for civilisation, humanity would have killed Mrs Boynton already – and this is exactly what the murderer proceeds to do. Enclosure in such a disturbing Frame only adds anxiety on top of a form of primal terror.²²

Next come frames (with a lowercase f), which are, according to Ronen, “locations which provide a *topological determination* to events and states in the story” (Ronen 1986, 423; emphasis in the original). They are intermediate areas that enfold the setting; they can be immediate surroundings and interact with the setting, or they can be distant, inactualised or inaccessible, and thus serving mostly as contextual locations (*ibid.*, 425-7). Christie’s main frame is the country village, especially when the setting is a country house. In *Styles*, this village is an immediate frame (although it is worth noting that the house is located one mile away from the village): Hastings spends some time in it, most notably during the coroner’s

²² See 2.3. for my analysis of isolation in Christie’s enclosed mysteries, and 3.1.2. for a study of atmosphere. For a more detailed study of Frames in Christie’s novels, read Sarnelli’s *Landscapes for Murder*.

investigation and the trial, and observes the villagers' reactions to the murder and the closed circle. In *Christmas*, however, the village is mentioned but never seen: the reader is only told that Simeon Lee had many affairs with women from the village, and that all the inhabitants are aware of it. The village is remarkable for its not-so-peaceful nature: while they are meant to be calm and respectable, they are actually a place for "Dear little local scandals! Libel, vilification, obscene language and murder!" (Christie 2002e, 197), as expressed in *The Moving Finger*. To quote Bargainnier:

The village is physically small; has a definitive, often rigid, social structure; and is 'isolated' from the great world. In addition, everyone is acquainted; [...] horror is engendered by the sheer outrageousness of crime in such a peaceful and bucolic environment." (Bargainnier 1980, 27)

On the other hand, Christie only uses London as a frame on a few occasions. In some of these novels, her choosing London is meant to illustrate the *train de vie* of the victim and the closed circle: in *Cards* Shaitana is an eccentric man of the world whose taste for macabre and unique parties leads him to his death, and in *Sparkling Cyanide* the sophisticated society gathered in a luxurious restaurant is motivated by money, lust, superficiality and power. In *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe*, the fact that the dentist's practice is located in London enables the writer to include politics in the plot. Finally, *Crooked House* is a story about family degeneracy and deviant behaviour (see Sarnelli 2019, 4-6). Where the countryside is the frame that creates a quickly shattered illusion of seamliness, London seems to be the place for ostentation and vice.

The last type of frame Christie uses, however, has all to do with enclosure. Indeed, it is not rare for the immediate surroundings of her setting to be a desert of sorts. In *Mesopotamia*, *Appointment* and *Nile*, the frame is indeed an actual desert. But the desert can also be an absence of space, as in *Clouds* in which the airplane is suspended in mid-air, far away from the land. Similarly, in *None* and *Evil Under the Sun*, the islands are surrounded by nothing but water: there is no one living there. In *Orient Express*, the train eventually stops in the middle of nowhere, surrounded only by snow. According to Ronen, there may be a "dividing line" making the setting and the frame separate: while both frame and setting belong to "the same spatial continuum," the frame becomes secondary and is but a backdrop for the setting (Ronen 1986, 426). But here lies the peculiarity of Christie's enclosed settings: in addition to this dividing line – usually the physical walls of the setting, that make frame and setting discrete – *the frame itself* becomes a boundary, cutting the setting away from the Frame – i.e., from the rest of the world. Not only is the setting contained, but it is also doubly enclosed – locked both by its own walls and by an outside boundary that makes it completely isolated.

In order to better understand how the locking of the walls of the setting and its isolation work, whatever method is used, I will now analyse the setting itself. According to Ronen, a setting is

formed by a set of fictional places which are the *topological focus* of the story. A setting is the zero point where the *actual* story-events and story-states are localized. [...] A setting, as a specific category of fictional places, is defined here as the actual immediate surrounding of an object, a character or an event. (*ibid.*, 423; emphases in the original)

The setting is “actual,” “immediate” and “central” (*ibid.*, 436). While it may contain other enclosed spaces, it is the focal point of the story.

Christie’s closed circle settings share a few common traits. The first one is that that all her settings have natural boundaries that makes their locking easy. Ronen explains that “sometimes a place-denoting noun carries information about the *boundaries* of the denoted place, i.e., whether it has definite boundaries (like a room) or indefinite boundaries (like the summit of a mountain)” (*ibid.*, 430; emphasis in the original). Each of Christie’s settings – be it a house, a train, a plane, a room – immediately denotes that it possesses definite boundaries. Secondly, all of her settings are closed, and sometimes isolated, by way of several methods analysed in 2.1.1. Apart from these similarities, each setting has its own properties; it can vary in size and shape, it may be private or public, interior or exterior. Christie’s settings may be extremely small (the smallest being the restaurant table in *Sparkling Cyanide*) or vast (the biggest being the islands in *None* and *Evil*). They are mostly interiors, with the exceptions of *Appointment*, *Evil*, and *None* – probably because an interior, in virtue of its being an inside space, has definite boundaries that an exterior, open space has not. Broadly speaking, Christie’s enclosed settings can be divided into a number of categories: houses (*Styles*, *Christmas*, *Crooked House*, *Mesopotamia*, *A Murder is Announced...*), shared accommodations (like guest houses in *Curtain*, *The Mousetrap* and *Hickory Dickory Death*, a boarding school in *Cat Among the Pigeons*, a hotel in *Evil*), means of transportation (a plane in *Clouds*, a train in *Orient Express*, a boat in *Nile*), islands (*None*, *Evil*), and sometimes a single room (*Tragedy*, *Cards*), with a few settings that have only appeared once: a restaurant (*Sparkling Cyanide*), a dentist’s practice (*One, Two, Buckle my Shoe*), and an exterior, inland space (*Appointment*).²³

²³ From a purely technical point of view, the category a setting belongs to may be questionable. For instance, while the train in *Orient Express* and the boat in *Nile* are means of transportation, they are also shared accommodations since the passengers have their own room, which are depicted on a map the same way houses are mapped in some of her novels; the setting in *Clouds* can be said to be a single room too; and while the characters in *Evil* are on an island, they also all live in a hotel, i.e. a shared accommodation.

Each of these settings has its own characteristics that have an impact on the type of community they contain. For instance, houses in Christie's stories are mostly home to a family. Shared accommodations usually house characters that, while they are not strangers to one another, do not know each other really well and have no link beyond their shared living quarters. Islands, single rooms and means of transportation usually contain strangers, which allows for some diversity in background (in *Nile*, *Orient Express*, *Clouds* and *None*, for instance, the suspects belong to every social class: the aristocracy as well as the upper, middle and lower classes).

Given the formulaic nature of the genre, it is indeed logical that Christie associated each type of setting with a specific type of closed circle. The most formulaic of her settings, however, remains the house. Usually, this setting is associated with a specific frame and Frame: the English countryside. The English country house murder is a Christie classic. Indeed, it provides all the elements needed for a closed circle setting and, more broadly, for a Golden Age mystery: the space is inherently bounded and easy to close, it is known and often mapped, meaning that the movements of the characters can be studied; and the house usually contains a pre-existing circle, i.e. usually a family, who have existing relationships and thus reasons to kill. Moreover, it corresponds to the necessity, analysed by W.H. Auden in his essay "The Guilty Vicarage," to have an apparently innocuous place in which murder comes as a shock: "it should be the Great Good Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder" (Auden 1974, 404). Or, to quote Bargainnier, "The familiarity of the country house lulls the reader by its beauty, its civility and its remoteness from the hustle and bustle of the everyday world" (Bargainnier 1980, 28). For this reason, the country house is often situated near or inside a seemingly well-to-do village, in which rumours and hidden vices are nevertheless rife.

In fact, there are only a few novels that do not follow that formula. *Crooked House* for instance depicts a house, but in London, the place for degeneracy, which is a clue about the murderer (a child, victim of her genetics and upbringing). Similarly, the house in *Mesopotamia* points out both the fact that the murderer is domestic in nature (a man kills his wife) but also that the motive for this murder is passion (since it is located in the East); and that the setting in *A Murder is Announced* is a country house, in spite of the circle being made out of mere acquaintances, indicates that the murderer is a resident of the house instead of one of the guests. Conversely, the closed circle in *Appointment* comprises mostly a family, but the fact that the setting is not a house but an exterior is a subtle clue that the murderer is not a

family member. The combination of Frame, frame and setting is constitutive of the setting itself, and an important element of the mystery.

More broadly, however, one can notice that Christie's settings – apart from the country house – tend to belong to a type of space that is “other.” Michel Foucault called these places heterotopias: places that, although they exist in our world, are a form of utopias, because they contain something unreal, or imaginary, or virtual. They are in temporal rupture with the rest of society; they are suspended in time, as the enclosed setting is (see 2.1.1.):

Les hétérotopies sont liées, le plus souvent, à des découpages du temps, c'est-à-dire qu'elles ouvrent sur ce qu'on pourrait appeler, par pure symétrie, des hétérochronies ; l'hétérotopie se met à fonctionner à plein lorsque les hommes se trouvent dans une sorte de rupture absolue avec leur temps traditionnel [...]. (Foucault 1967)

Foucault mentions that cemeteries are the perfect embodiment of this aspect of heterotopias, for “le cimetière commence avec cette étrange hétérochronie qu'est, pour un individu, la perte de la vie ” (*ibid.*) ; Christie's settings, centered around the murder, are no different.

In addition, heterotopias are places that obey rules different from the ones that usually govern society. The “heterotopia of deviation” for instance is a place for those who live in the margins of society, such as patients in hospitals, or criminals in prisons. Soldier Island in *None* acts as a heterotopia of deviation because of its history: it first belonged to “an American millionaire who was crazy about yachting” and is now said to belong to a “Hollywood film star,” “Royalty,” “Young Lord L—” or “the Admiralty” – eccentrics, in short (Christie 2011, 1-2). The utopian character of Soldier Island also lies in its association (either real or fantasised) with luxury, fame and glamour, but also secrecy and scandal what with its being allegedly used for a secret “honeymoon” or for “very hush-hush experiments (*ibid.*, 2); this makes Soldier Island a phantasmal place that mostly exists in people's imagination. The island being a heterotopia of deviation is relevant to the plot, because in the novel it houses a different type of deviant people: murderers. Christie also uses more typical, down-to-earth heterotopias of deviation, for instance guest houses, like the one in *Curtain* that contains misfits:

‘That's the depressing part of places like this. Guest houses run by broken-down gentlepeople. They're full of failures – of people who have never got anywhere and never will get anywhere, of people – who – who have been defeated and broken by life, of people who are old and tired and finished.’ (Christie 2002a, 106-7)

A heterotopia may also juxtapose several spaces in one location, such as the theatre stage in which the set changes from scene to scene. This is the case in *Orient Express*, in which the

train, at the beginning, passes several locations, whether known cities like Belgrade or unnamed, constantly changing landscapes visible from the window, thus making the train an ever-moving, never-settling space – in addition to its containing people from all over the world: when Poirot, in chapter four, keeps meeting characters on his way to his own compartment, he is metaphorically stopping in a different part of the world each time. This applies to other modes of transportation such as the boat or the plane, but also, perhaps more strikingly, to the house in *Crooked House*. In this novel, all the characters living in the house have their own apartment, the decoration of which reflects their personality. The narrator goes from Aristides Leonides's apartment, "furnished with restraint – well-polished dark oak and gleaming brass," to Philip and Magda's, an apartment with "furniture covered in heavy brocade," "photographs and pictures of actors, dancers and stage scenes and designs," and "masses of flowers," (Christie 1986, 39) to Clemency's apartment that has "no picture," "hardly any furniture" save for "mere utilitarian necessities" and "no ornaments" but "light and space and air" (*ibid.*, 57). The narrator walks through rooms as one would walk through different countries. This heterogeneity is meant to reflect not only the various personalities of the house's residents – Aristide's practical mind and love of money, Magda's exuberant and dramatic personality, Clemency's no-nonsense and scientific behaviour – but also the lack of unity in this family that is manipulated by Aristide. This house is a space that is other, more similar to a dollhouse than to a home.

A heterotopia may also be a space that is in rupture with its time: for example, a museum or a library focus on times other than the current one, which turns these spaces into places that aim to accumulate various times and epochs. Christie's focus on archaeological work makes several of her novels such heterotopias: in *Mesopotamia* the house belongs to archaeologists that collect various objects from the Antiquity, in *Nile* and *Appointment* the murder occurs in a place surrounded by ruins. According to Foucault, heterotopias are also places that are connected to time in its most ephemeral aspect: these are places for parties and entertainment. According to this definition, places that temporarily house a murder party (*A Murder is Announced*), birthday parties (*Sparkling Cyanide*) or high-society dinners (*Tragedy, Cards*) become heterotopias, just as a hotel people go to on holidays (*Evil*). Foucault also mentions crisis heterotopias, which are dedicated only to a part of society that is in crisis. He mentions young boys discovering their sexualities away from their family, in boarding schools. The principle may certainly apply to boarding schools (*Cat Among the Pigeons*) or a student hostel (*Hickory*).

Heterotopias are, in short, places that are other: they have a definite function that makes them obey conventions that differ from the rest of society. Life in a train, in a guest house, or during a party, has different dynamics than in a family's country house. It is striking, then, that Christie used either country houses or heterotopias to be the "topological focus" of her murders and closed circles. Choosing either a traditional, respectable setting in which murder will shock, or settings that are places for crisis, deviation and rupture from society raises questions about the dynamics of the closed circle in such settings, and the consequences on the murder, the plot and the characters. In order to understand why Christie chose these types of settings for her closed circle mysteries, and to see the consequences on the plot, I am first going to study the characteristics of these settings in more detail: how realistic are they? How do the characters move within them? What to think of the frame acting as a supplementary boundary that isolates the setting from the rest of the world? How does the combination of Frame, frame and setting impact the closed circle?

2.2. The organisation and characterisation of the enclosed setting

2.2.1. A theatrical world: the question of verisimilitude in the enclosed universe

The analysis of Christie's various settings and means of enclosure raises questions about the issue of verisimilitude in Christie's enclosed universes. Part 1.4.1. of this *mémoire* analysed the question of realism within detective fiction to conclude eventually that detective fiction needs not to be realistic (i.e. to be an exact, not idealized account of real life) but to aim for verisimilitude (i.e. "detailed accuracy of description"); in other words, the question of actual plausibility can be overlooked for the sake of fair play, on the condition that the depicted universe remains rational and believable. The *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* defines verisimilitude as follows:

The semblance of truth or reality in literary works; or the literary principle that requires a consistent illusion of truth to life. The term covers both the exclusion of improbabilities (as in realism and naturalism) and the careful disguising of improbabilities in non-realistic works. As a critical principle, it originates in Aristotle's concept of mimesis or imitation of nature. It was invoked by French critics (as *vraisemblance*) to enforce the dramatic unities in the 17th and 18th centuries, on the grounds that changes of scene or time would break the illusion of truth to life for the audience. (Baldick 2008, 349)

This definition raises questions about verisimilitude in Christie's closed circle. While verisimilitude is of primary importance to ensure that there is no improbability in the plot and

that the mystery remains logical, Christie does not always obey the principles of verisimilitude. How is verisimilitude handled in Christie's closed circles then, if verisimilitude is absolutely essential to these stories but at the same time the very process of physical enclosure sacrifices diegetic verisimilitude? Similarly, how to reconcile this exigence of verisimilitude with Christie's tendency to give minimal details about her enclosed settings?

Indeed, the nature of Christie's methods of enclosure and her choices of settings can be seen as controversial in regard to the principle of verisimilitude. The act of enclosing accumulates improbabilities: the setting is ideally delineated; it contains people who *all* have plausible means, motives and/or opportunity to murder the victim; and not only is it closed at the exact moment of the murder but it possesses *several simultaneous* layers of enclosure.

And there is the question of probability: why should a murderer choose to commit his or her crime not in some dark alley but in conditions which may seem to make detection highly likely? [...] In *The Orient Express*, the opportunity is deliberately and elaborately contrived: this is when the 12 avengers can find themselves together with their victim. This goes wrong: Poirot is also in the carriage, unexpectedly, and a series of misdirections has to be mounted to confuse him: the false clues, the woman in the dressing gown. The effect is theatrical [...]. (York 2007, 15-16)

In her quest to obey the rule of fair play and to make enclosure efficient and unquestionable, Christie created a formula that is to say the least artificial with respect to the general conventions of verisimilitude. In other words, as her practice of the genre became progressively more formal, her closed circles became more contrived. This has to do with the genre's relation to verisimilitude: detective fiction is conceived as a game, meaning that it is not supposed to be entirely verisimilar. The rules that ensure fair play are more important than realism or verisimilitude: while the latter is essential to the extent that it locates the story in the rational world (by precluding the use of supernatural or sensationalist elements that are impossible for the reader to deduce), improbabilities are tolerated if they allow the reader to participate in the game or if their aim is to guarantee the eventual resolution of the mystery. The most telling example of this sacrifice of verisimilitude over fair play is the closed circle ploy itself (see 1.4.1.). There is a paradox here in that Christie's closed circle in fact aimed to be *more* verisimilar than her 'open' mysteries, which do not obey the rules of fair play: if the culprit can be anyone, then there is no guarantee that they are among the selected suspects, and this selection of suspects itself becomes unreliable and subjective to say the least. The tricks used to make the murderer a known character may not be verisimilar as well: in *The ABC Murders* and *The Pale Horse*, the culprits respectively commit unrelated murders to disguise their crimes as a serial killer's or feel the need to make themselves noticed by the

police. This led Christie to adopt the closed circle ploy, to make a number of suspects plausibly known from the start, which makes deductions in a confined space plausible – i.e., the deduction process of the novel is more convincing and less implausible, even though the diegetic context of the crime is not so plausible due to this closure.

The fact that this formula was intended to erase improbabilities instead of creating new ones can seem puzzling. However, I would like to argue that Christie knew about this lack of verisimilitude and chose to prioritise fair play over the “consistent illusion of truth to life.” As a result, her closed circles are very theatrical in nature, as mentioned by York. This ties with the theatrical origin of the concept of verisimilitude as defined in the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*. In fact, Christie herself explicitly compares her mysteries to theatre: the title of her last novel, *Curtain*, signals not only the end of the game, but also the end of the metaphorical play that is at work in her novels. Christie’s mysteries abound with theatrical references: many of her works take place in the theatre world (*Tragedy*) or their solution relies on theatrical tricks such as impersonation, disguise, illusion, or devices (*Mirrors, Christmas, Orient Express, Tragedy...*); several of her characters are actors (Sir Charles Cartwright in *Tragedy*, Mrs Hubbard/Linda Arden in *Orient Express*, Jane Wilkinson in *Lord Edgware Dies...*) and a lot of murderers disguise themselves (most of the culprits in *Orient Express*, Wargrave in *None* when he poses as dead, Sir Charles Cartwright in *Tragedy*, Norman Gale in *Clouds*, Miss Gilchrist in *After the Funeral...*).²⁴

Theatre was indeed a huge influence on Christie: she explains in her *Autobiography* that she had been a theatre-goer and a theatre lover ever since her childhood and her education gave great importance to the French classical theatre, for she studied “Molière, Racine and Corneille” and went to see the “classic dramas” at the Comédie Française (Christie 1977, 131, 181). This influence can be felt in the way she writes the majority of her detective novels. Indeed, she explained that she liked writing plays best because “The circumscribed limits of the stage simplify things for you. [...] You only have what can be seen and heard and done to deal with. Looking and listening and feeling is what you have to deal with” (quoted in Green 2015, 2). This feature can be observed in most of her novels as well, in which she writes in a very plain, factual style, with a lot of dialogues and an extensive use of external focalisation that turns the reader into a viewer of sorts (some novels are exceptions to that pattern, like

²⁴ For a more detailed analysis of Christie’s theatrical writing style and of the theatrical plot elements in her novels, read York’s *Agatha Christie – Power and Illusion*, especially the chapters “The Spectacle of Death” (9-21) and “Actors and Imposters” (35-47).

None). Most importantly, this quote reveals what Christie wants most: to create a finite world, as ideally bound as the stage, as defined by Anne Ubersfeld:

Espace cerné dans ses limites. [...] Espace qui se définit par son rapport d'exclusion avec ce qui n'est pas lui. Même matériellement floues, les limites de l'espace sont virtuellement tranchées comme au rasoir. Espace qui est aussi un espace-temps : défini dans son extension, il l'est aussi dans sa temporalité ; s'il n'est pas enclos dans l'édifice *ad hoc*, il disparaît, passé le temps de la représentation. (Ubersfeld 1996b, 49)

Such an enclosure is exactly what Christie is looking for to respect the demands of the detective genre. For this reason, her handling of enclosure imitates the dramatic practice.

The process of enclosure, indeed, is perhaps the most theatrical aspect of Christie's closed circles. Christie herself explicitly likens the enclosed setting to a stage in *Mirrors* and highlights the theatrical organisation of her enclosed settings, where characters come in and out and move within the delimited space as actors would do on stage:

'[...] I was looking at the whole thing from an entirely different point of view. I was thinking of this place in the terms of the theatre. *Not reality, but artificiality!* Just come over here. Think of it in the terms of a stage set. *Lighting, entrances, exits. Dramatis Personae. Noises off.* All very interesting. [...]' (Christie 2002g, 243-4; emphases mine)

'I want you to think of this place as a stage set, Inspector. As it was on the night Christian Gulbrandsen was killed. You're here in the audience looking at the people on the stage [...] and just like on the stage *there are entrances and exits and the characters go out to different places.* [...]' (*ibid.*, 266; emphases mine)

It is no wonder then that a lot of Christie's closed circles were adapted to the stage by Christie herself (like *None* – under the title *Ten Little Indians* –, *Appointment*, *The Hollow*, *Announced*, *Towards Zero*, and many others) and that Christie's most successful play, *The Mousetrap*, was a closed circle²⁵. The closed circle format is inherently theatrical; it corresponds to what is called in French a *huis clos*. In the everyday language, this expression means “with a locked door”; but it also the name of a specific subgenre of literature in which the characters are locked in together and cannot leave. *Huis clos* are often used as a pretence to a play, as in for example Jean-Paul Sartre's very famous *No Exit* (*Huis clos* in French). In this type of play, the characters are trapped together, locked out from the world to be questioned and confronted, as in Christie's closed circles.²⁶

²⁵ As Beatrix Hesse remarked, all of her plays were not successful. However, the problems with these dramatisations had nothing to do with enclosure but with other issues such as large casts of characters, plot changes, too-complex plots, the overwhelming presence of the detective, and the fact that some of Christie's stories worked best when given access to the characters' points of view. If anything, and according to Hesse, the restriction to a single, enclosed setting was a benefit more than a fault of these adaptations. (Hesse 2015, 210, 216-7).

²⁶ Interestingly, in French, the *huis clos* also refers to trials conducted in the absence of any audience. This distance from the public eye can also be seen in Christie's closed circles, in which the only characters in attendance are usually the suspects and the detective.

Interestingly, the *huis clos* play is considered the logical culmination of the rules of classical theatre. As mentioned in the definition above, classical theatre (and most especially French classical theatre, which Christie studied) obeyed three rules of unity as defined by Aristotle in order to achieve verisimilitude: unity of action (the story must be focused; every element and side-plot must be relevant to the main plot), unity of time (the action must take place in a defined window of time; classical theatre limited this timeframe to ideally no more than twenty-four hours) and unity of place (the action must take place in a limited number of places, ideally only the ones the characters can go to in the span of twenty-four hours or less; this principle led playwrights to stage the action in one setting only to the exclusion of all others) (Couprie 1995, 38-40). Couprie sees the *huis clos* as the ultimate form of the rule of the three unities, as the story usually focuses on one action, in a given, definite time, in one place the characters never leave (*ibid.*, 40). Christie's closed circle mysteries obey these three rules too: they only focus on the mystery, they usually take place in a limited amount of time (and it is worth noting that the murder happened within a delimited timeframe that enables to identify a number of suspects) and in a very limited number of settings – in fact, enclosure depends on these three factors as explained in 2.1.1.. This means that Christie's closed circles are also *huis clos* in that in a number of them the characters end up confined in one isolated setting for the duration of the story (as in *None, Orient Express, Mesopotamia, The Mousetrap, Curtain, Christmas*, and others).

It becomes clear, then, that it is not simply that Christie's closed circles have similarities with theatre but that Christie's works obey the rules of dramatic verisimilitude rather than the ones of the novelistic verisimilitude – which makes them intrinsically theatrical.

Another element pointing to that theatricality is that enclosure is a main characteristic of plays just as it is a defining element of Christie's closed circles:

Ce lieu scénique est un lieu particulier, avec des caractéristiques qui lui sont propres [...]. Tout d'abord il est limité, circonstruit, il est une portion délimitée de l'espace. (Ubersfeld 1996a, 115)

Tout espace théâtral est clos par nature dans la mesure où il s'oppose à ce qui n'est pas lui, clos par rapport au monde, à la "cité". L'espace scénique est aussi clos par rapport au spectateur. Encore faut-il s'interroger sur le sens de ce mot "clôture"; nous touchons ici au paradoxe du théâtral : l'espace scénique est en même temps, par nature, ouvert au monde – des techniciens, de son appareil pratique – et ouvert au spectateur pour lequel il est fait. Il est donc difficile de parler de clôture concrète; mais les signes spatiaux peuvent construire pour le spectateur un effet de clôture [...]. (Ubersfeld 1996b, 81)

As explained in Part 2.1.1., the closed setting is circumscribed and delineated, a delimited and bounded portion of space just like the stage. It is similarly opposed to the rest of the world:

both closed spaces are isolated from the rest of the world, while still allowing the reader and the viewer to see the whole investigation process (but not the murders themselves; they are a “narrative secret,” Champigny 1997, 13, that is hidden from sight in both the novels and their dramatisations by a process of ellipsis. This is not unlike French classical theatre, in which all acts of violence similarly happen offstage so as not to shock the viewers – here, the aim is not to spoil the suspense). This complete seclusion from the rest of the world is worded in *The Mousetrap* by the last-arrived character, Paravicini:

But now, I tell you this. I complete the picture. From now on there will be no more arrivals. And no departures either. By tomorrow – perhaps even already – we are cut off from civilization. No butcher, no baker, no milkman, no postman, no daily papers – nobody and nothing but ourselves. That is admirable – admirable. (Christie 1978, 316)

This excerpt reflects the enclosing process of both theatre and the closed circle technique. *The Mousetrap* is both a play and a classical closed circle mystery, which makes evident the similarity between the two genres as far as enclosure is concerned. In this play, the characters come in, one by one, and introduce themselves, until they are eventually locked in and confronted with the fact that there is a murderer in their midst. This structure is employed both in classical theatre (especially the *huis clos* as far as isolation is concerned) and in Christie’s closed circle. In a play, the characters cannot leave the closed little world of the stage, and in a closed circle mystery the characters cannot leave the place they are confined in. In both cases the only characters that matter are to be found within the physical limits of the world that is depicted, as is shown by the fact that the curtain falls and the first scene ends after a character makes the observation quoted above: there is a finality to this declaration that illustrates the fact the circle is now closed.²⁷ *The Mousetrap* combines these two types of enclosure: in the diegetic setting the characters cannot leave Monkswell Manor (they are trapped, hence the title of the play), and Monkswell Manor is physically circumscribed to the limits of the stage. *The Mousetrap*, as one of Christie’s most successful closed circle mysteries, shows that the dramatic enclosure and the novelistic enclosure are more than merely compatible: they are one and the same when a closed circle is brought on stage, which points out to the fact that the diegesis in Christie’s closed circles is confined to the enclosed setting as in theatre, but also that Christie’s closed circles are inherently theatrical.

It is also notable that the moment when the circle is closed is also the moment when the outside world stops existing for all intents and purposes. Isolation is a particularly relevant

²⁷ Sergeant Trotter is admittedly introduced in the story after that. However, Trotter embodies a double figure: he is apparently the detective figure (who sometimes arrives after the murder has been committed and the circle has been closed, as Poirot in *Christmas*) but he also is the murderer, that is to say the disruptive element that brings chaos to the peaceful society gathered in Monkswell Manor.

characteristic of theatre as well, as mentioned by Ubersfeld. Just as the outside world is left out almost completely in Christie's closed circle novels in a rather solipsistic manner, plays are typically bounded in a single setting to the exclusion of everything else. In addition, both genres adopt the same type of isolated setting:

[...] English theatre tends to confine itself to a single set that – due to a lack of sufficient depth of the stage – almost always has to be an interior. Since the programme does not change nightly, the set may be built solidly and furnished for a long run. A dramatist who wants to see his work performed has to adapt to these circumstances. The result is an endless succession of drawing-rooms as the settings of English plays, where a complex plot may unfold most easily. (Kosok 1980, as quoted and translated in Hesse 2015, 97)

Plays and Christie's closed circles thus both have a static setting, usually the cosy interior of a house. Even when the setting is not the usual house, it nevertheless remains an unchanging, frozen setting, the role of which is to provide “a limited and controlled backdrop against which the [events and characters] so central to the story can be silhouetted” (Cawelti 1976, 97). For this reason, Christie's closed circle mysteries are easily adapted to the stage as far as settings and enclosure are concerned.

Indeed, the on-stage adaptations of Christie's closed circles are easily confined to a single room. *The Hollow* (play) entirely takes place in “the garden room of Sir Henry Angkatell's house, The Hollow” (Christie 1978, 184) while the eponymous novel takes place in the house itself in its entirety, for instance. The same goes in *Towards Zero*: the murder occurs in a house, Gull's Point, and the play is set in “the drawing-room at Gull's Point” (*ibid.*, 478). *Appointment with Death* (play) is set in “The Travellers' Camp” (*ibid.*, 120) like the novel and is described in similar terms: the stage directions mention “fantastic scarlet rocks,” “a path,” and “sleeping tents” (*ibid.*), all three of which are described in the original novel. A more telling example would perhaps be *Ten Little Indians*, the adaptation of *None*. The play takes place in “the living room of a house on Indian Island” (*ibid.*, 6). The stage directions read:

The scene is the living room of the house on Indian Island. It is a very modern room, and luxuriously furnished. It is a bright sunlight evening. Nearly the whole of the back of the stage is a window looking directly out to sea. [...] In the Left, near windows, is a door to a dining room. Down stage Left is a door, communicating with hall. [...] Up Right is a door to study. Middle stage Right is fireplace. Over it hangs the reproduction of the “Ten Little Indians” nursery rhyme. On the mantelpiece are a group of ten china Indian figures. They are not spaced out, but clustered so that the exact number is not easily seen. [...] The room is barely furnished with modern furniture. (ibid., 7; italics in the original)

Even though the setting is smaller than that of the novel, it comprises the same elements. The background view on the sea sets the story on the island and serves to isolate the characters.

The insistence on the furniture of the room – scantily furnished but with expensive and modern items, with an emphasis on the china figures and the framed poem – reproduces the original setting of the novel and the jarring contrast between the modernity of the house and the Gothic-like bloodbath that occurs in it: the novels describes “a perfect bedroom decorated throughout in the modern style” and “a mantelpiece bare of ornaments” (Christie 2011, 33).

The main atmospheric elements and clues of the mystery can easily be confined into a single theatre setting because the adaption only requires to take all the important elements of the story and to confine them into a single room, a setting that is only marginally smaller than the original, already limited setting. Indeed, theatre, like the mystery story, is what Malmgren calls a centered world:

By ‘centered’ we mean a world which has a center, an anchor, a ground; a centered world is one in which effects can be connected to causes, where external signs can be linked to internal conditions. The centeredness of mystery fiction is frequently dramatized in the actual number of physical locales that come into play. In mystery fiction, there is usually one significant scene of the crime (estate, village, railway car); the investigator examines this scene, trying to link its signs (clues) to their root causes. (Malmgren 2001, 13)

In other words, everything that is mentioned in a mystery story must be necessary to the story, which often translates into restricting the story to only one significant setting. Malmgren calls this convention “a function of the non-arbitrariness of the sign” (*ibid.*, 17). This concept is similar to the unity of action that is required of theatre: both genres require a small, motivated world where every element or prop must have a significance and function in the diegesis (Hesse 2015, 109-10), a world constrained in order to be more easily controlled by the author.

The spatial constraints inherent to a limited setting may lead to an effect of artificiality. In Christie’s closed circle mysteries, however, this artificiality is deliberate. The closed setting and the process of enclosure are purposefully theatrical and contrived, which is fitting for a conventional genre intended as a game that depends on lies, masquerading and illusion. The diegetic process of space restriction obeys the rules of dramatic verisimilitude and does not aim to be realistic, instead asking for the reader’s willing suspension of disbelief – as opposed to the deductive process, which spatial restriction makes more plausible. The goal is similar to what is achieved in theatre, i.e. to contain the entire diegesis within the walls of one setting which is the focus of the action.

Nevertheless, as the *Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms* mentioned, verisimilitude – whether dramatic in nature or not – is supposed to ensure both “the exclusion of improbabilities [...] and the careful disguising of improbabilities” (Baldick 2008, 349); and according to Hesse, “[t]he solidity of set and furniture helps to reinforce the illusion of

stage realism and thus conforms to the doctrine of verisimilitude governing both the well-made play and the genre of detective fiction” (Hesse 2015, 97). In order to cover for its lack of verisimilitude, Christie’s closed settings should thus imitate the real world in their description and organisation.

2.2.2. Imitating “the surface texture of the real world”²⁸: the enclosed setting, *mimesis* and maps

In order to obey the rules of verisimilitude (already compromised by the genre’s inherent artificiality), Christie’s closed circle mysteries should thus be mimetic. *Mimesis* – as theorised by Aristotle in his *Poetics* – means “imitation” in Greek; it consists in “reproducing an external reality or any aspect of it” (Baldick 2008, 207). In other words, the aim is to imitate real life in order to create an illusion of truth. Although relevant to literature as a whole, *mimesis* is originally a dramatic concept meant to make up for the artificiality of theatre:

Le mimétique, c’est-à-dire le fait que l’espace scénique est l’image et le simulacre d’un lieu du monde, est lié au fictionnel. C’est parce qu’est racontée sur scène une histoire qui doit se passer en un lieu déterminé, que l’espace scénique a pour mission de figurer (d’imiter) le lieu de la fiction. Plus la fiction est proche du vraisemblable, d’une conformité réelle ou prétendue avec le monde, plus l’espace scénique se définit comme l’image d’un lieu dans le monde. (Ubersfeld 1996b, 60)

The mimetic element is thus to be found in the representation of the physical, enclosed space. Although fictional, this space should mirror and conform with the real world: it should be a fictional imitation of actual places that the viewer can identify and relate to.

It seems paradoxical that Christie’s works – so formulaic in nature – could be mimetic:

The mimetic element in literature confronts us with the world as we know it, while the formulaic element reflects the construction of an ideal world without the disorder, the ambiguity, the uncertainty, and the limitations of the world of our experience. Of course, the mimetic and the formulaic represent two poles that most literary works lie somewhere between. (Cawelti 1976, 13)

Christie’s closed circles must thus find a balance between artificiality and verisimilitude: while they need to be centered (and artificial) they must also aim to imitate the “surface texture of the real world” (*ibid.*) and to be verisimilar (see 1.4.1. on this subject), especially since these stories usually remain rooted in the enclosed space for the whole novel.

If Christie seeks to imitate reality, it seems logical that some of her settings exist in real life – the Orient Express, for instance, is an actual train. However, this constitutes an exception, for Christie’s approach to settings is similar to that of Edgar Allan Poe or Gaston Leroux (see

²⁸ Quote taken from Cawelti 1976, 13.

1.3.1.). Poe located his deduction tales in a fictional Paris: while the frame (Paris, France) was real, the places he described were pure fiction; Leroux located his settings in existing frames, but the settings themselves were fictional. Similarly, Christie's settings exist in a real frame (like a specific region of England, for instance) but remain fictional, which gives her more leeway to adapt them to her needs instead of being limited by existing features. For instance, *None* requires a very specific kind of island: it must be remote from the coast but still visible from it so that witnesses can attest to its enclosure, it must be small, easily enclosed, and have only one house big enough to room ten people. All these conditions are more easily achieved by creating a fictional island than to try and find a real one meeting all these requirements. The Orient Express is the exception because Christie was inspired by the place itself and as a consequence the topography of its wagons is essential to the solution of the mystery. Similarly, some backgrounds may be real if they fulfil an atmospheric purpose or their being real is relevant to the plot. This is the case with the archaeological sites described in *Mesopotamia*, *Nile*, and *Appointment*: not only are they real, but their descriptions are extremely verisimilar. In other words, the frames Christie uses refer to real-life elements which gives them the appearance of truth to life. But given how isolated the settings are from the frame in Christie's novels, it is not sufficient to create verisimilitude. As such, the setting must be verisimilar as well – in other words, it has to be mimetic. How does Christie then give the appearance of reality, given that (as mentioned in Chapter One of this *mémoire*) her descriptions are minimalistic?

A major difference between Christie and her predecessors like Leroux, Doyle or even Poe is that her descriptions are scarce. While *mimesis* demands detail in order to create the semblance of life, Christie includes very little detail about her fictional settings. For instance, the house of Styles Court is described neither in *Styles* nor in *Curtain* – save for the fact that in *Curtain*, it is equipped with modern plumbing and needs to be repainted. The reader only knows that it is a “fine old house” (Christie 2007, 14) and a “spidery” “Victorian relic” (Christie 2002a, 101). Christie's descriptions – when there is one – are very matter-of-fact. The reader may be given some practical details regarding the setting: whether or not it is modern, how large it is, how wealthy it is. However, the usual elements one would expect in a description (architectural elements, colour patterns, furniture...) are left out.

The result of this technique might admittedly not be very lifelike, especially since we consider that according to Roland Barthes the lifelike effect (*l'effet de réel*) depends on the presence of description without a function – its randomness gives a greater impression of reality. In fact, every detail mentioned in a detective story must be relevant to the story (either

as a clue, or as a red herring), which precludes the addition of information for no purpose; for this reason, the detective story is bound to be more or less artificial (Eisenzweig 1986, 162-3). However, this manner of description (or lack thereof) allows the reader to feel familiarity towards the enclosed settings. The settings are very generic: Christie's houses look like any other English house, the boat and the plane could be *any* boat or plane. They are archetypal. Besides finding a place where a community of characters can plausibly be found, her aim is to make her setting as little individualised as possible, to give the reader a sense of familiarity:

[...] the one thing that infuriates me is when people complain that I always set my books in country houses. You *have* to be concerned with a house: with where people *live*. You can make it an hotel, or a train, or a pub – but it's got to be where people are brought together. And I think it must be a background that readers will recognize, because explanations are so boring. If you set a detective story in, say, a laboratory, I don't think people will enjoy it so much. No, a country house is obviously the best. (Christie 1966, 25)

Besides the fact that Christie disliked descriptions, the familiarity of the setting allows her to focus entirely on the characters and the plot without the reader being impeded by an unknown setting. If the reader knows the setting, then he or she knows its social codes and is able to recognise anything out of the ordinary. This is in keeping with the fact that in Christie's novels the most important clues are domestic: in *Styles* for instance, the solution relies on a chimney fire being lit in August and the disposition of a vase on a mantelpiece. Verisimilitude then lies not in specifics but in the general quality of the familiar settings; in other words, verisimilitude depends on the writer's skill to describe in broad strokes archetypal settings. In this case, the fact that those settings are archetypal enables Christie to forego extensive description that would make the setting too specific – and thus unfamiliar – because the reader automatically fills in the blank.

It does not mean, however, that Christie's closed settings are never described. On occasion, her settings may set up an atmosphere, as in *Christmas* for instance. Even though there are few details given about the particulars of Gorston Hall, the reader does learn a thing or two about it. The house is “a good solid mass of red brick, unimaginative but solid,” “an ugly old mansion” (Christie 2001a, 58). This description immediately conveys that the house is imposing, but its solidity is also oppressing. The description of its interior insists on that discomfort:

On the first floor of Gorston Hall a long passage led to a big room overlooking the front drive. It was a room furnished in the more flamboyant of old-fashioned styles. It had heavy brocaded wallpaper, rich leather armchairs, large vases embossed with dragons, sculptures in bronze... Everything in it was magnificent, costly and solid. (*ibid.*, 46)

Although the description remains non-specific, it gives the reader everything he or she needs to know. First of all, old Simeon Lee is extremely rich, as emphasised by the quality and undisguised wealth of his furniture. From this description alone, the reader can deduce that this house is probably very oppressing and uncomfortable to live in, what with all the exhibited artefacts and their imposing nature that is emphasised throughout the whole description (“heavy,” “rich,” “large”). In fact, the effect produced is one of exaggeration: everything is excessive, from the “brocaded” furniture to the “bronze” and the “leather.” The house has a museum quality to it (as Harry will later acknowledge on page 60; on this same page, he also calls the house a “mausoleum”). In other words, this house is all about pretentiousness, but there is no life to it. This description also gives an immediate understanding of Simeon Lee’s personality. Simeon is an old-fashioned man with similarly old-fashioned beliefs – for instance, his most ardent desire in life is to beget a worthy son – which leaves him dissatisfied with all his heirs, and enables Pilar to manipulate him – and he believes in the superiority of men over women – which leads him to have many an affair and to beget several illegitimate children, a fact that is key to understanding the murder. Simeon also likes to boast about his wealth and is an exuberant personality: he likes to show his family his “flamboyant” furniture. The size and position of his room within the house is also relevant: he has a big room, which reveals his big personality, and it enables him to overlook the front drive, meaning that he can see who enters, who leaves, and when – in other words, Simeon Lee is in control of his house and thus his family. This description allows the reader to see how domineering Simeon Lee is and how miserable his family must be, especially since there seems to be so much money for the seizing if only Simeon died. These excerpts efficiently give the reader three potential motives for the murder: money, freedom from tyranny, and revenge for abuse.

The location and its description are thus connected to criminal motives. This betrays that the author’s choice is not dictated by verisimilitude only. As seen before, the choice of enclosure is dictated by the rule of fair play, and the choice of setting depends on plot convenience; similarly, the spatial characterization of the enclosed space is psychologically and thematically motivated. In other words, the description of the enclosed space has a mostly utilitarian function – although Christie occasionally uses description with an atmospheric purpose in mind (see Chapter Three). This explains why Christie’s descriptions mostly remain practical, as they only aim to reveal something about the characters or to give clues to the reader. In *Styles* for instance, the description of the ornaments on Mrs Inglethorp’s mantelpiece appear not to create a lifelike effect but because they are clues. The most extreme

example of that is *Mesopotamia*. The narrator, Amy Leatheran, launches into a lengthy description of the house where the action takes place. Five pages are dedicated to detailing the house and its construction (Christie 2001b; 41, 42, 51-53). Nevertheless, this description remains factual:

Beyond the antika-room, but reached through a door which gave on the courtyard, was Mrs Leidner's bedroom. This, like the other rooms on that side of the house, had a couple of barred windows looking out over the ploughed countryside. Round the corner next to Mrs Leidner's room, but with no actual communicating door, was Dr Leidner's room. This was the first of the rooms on the east side of the building. Next to it was the room that was to be mine. Next to me was Miss Johnson's, with Mr and Mrs Mercado's beyond. After that came two so-called bathrooms. (*ibid.*, 52)

As this extract reveals, the novel does not describe what the house *looks like* – once again, it remains generic, save for a few atmospheric references to archaeology or local colour (“the antika-room,” “the ploughed countryside”). Instead, the narrator takes great pain to describe the topography of the setting – which room is where, which rooms are concomitant or communicating... More than a description of the house, this is the description of the plan Christie gives her reader on page 42 of the novel.

Maps are indeed a very common device in Christie's closed circles. As was pointed out in Chapter One of this *mémoire*, she inherited this tradition from Conan Doyle and from Leroux. Like them, she uses plans to make the setting's topography clearer to the reader and to give the clues necessary to solve the mystery. The narrator often justifies their inclusion with practical reasons such as clarity (“To make this part of my story clear”, Christie 2007, 43), “convenience” (*ibid.*, 62), or the fact that they are essential to the understanding of the story and of the mystery (“the plan of the house was to prove of special interest later,” Christie 2001b, 41). This last justification is the reason why Christie only ever includes plans in her closed circle mysteries: it is where maps are the most necessary, contrary to ‘open’ mysteries. Whenever a closed circle depends on spatial organisation, a map is included.

As Bargainnier points out, Christie use maps because they “create greater verisimilitude: the place exists in space; here is where it happened” (Bargainnier 1980, 25). Indeed, according to Robert Tally, the fact that this is an item that the reader can use to understand the setting – “making it subject to apprehension, interpretation, and exploration” – makes the represented space more tangible to the reader (Tally 2016, 28). The fact that it is presented as a document aiming to represent reality accurately also helps to create an effect of verisimilitude (Eisenzweig 1986, 161-2). At first glance, this use of maps seems incompatible with the theatrical aesthetic of Christie's closed circle mysteries: indeed, there is no map or

diagram in theatre. However, I would argue that, while they are not a theatrical element, diagrams aim to give the readers a visual sense of the enclosed space – something that is inherent to the theatrical experience, but absent from the reading experience. According to Ubersfeld:

Si l'espace théâtral peut être considéré comme l'analogie d'un réel extra-scénique dont il reproduit l'apparence [...] il est aussi l'espace d'un jeu mené par les comédiens dont les corps occupent cet espace. [...] Quelle que soit la forme « décorative » de l'espace scénique, et si poussé qu'y soit le mimétique, il ne saurait exclure le ludique et le plaisir que donne au spectateur le mouvement des comédiens. Ce mouvement [...] peut être l'essentiel [...] dans tous les cas où le sens est montré par le rapport des corps entre eux et du corps à l'espace. Non seulement il est fondamental dans tous les espaces [...] où ne sont montrés que l'espacement des corps et leur activité propre, mais il donne son sens, dans le meilleur des cas, au décor, au lieu imité, puisqu'il montre l'activité humaine qui y figure. (Ubersfeld 1996b, 70)

Theatre allows viewers to see the scenic space, how it is organised and how characters move inside it; diagrams similarly enables readers to visually perceive the characters' relationship with the enclosed space. It is the movement within the enclosed scenic space that generates the recreational dimension of the theatrical experience; similarly, in Christie's closed circles, diagrams trigger the reader's response to play the deduction game by analysing each character's movements within the enclosed space. This is the reason why Robert T. Tally Jr. writes that "novels and maps, two exceedingly powerful forms of knowledge, give form to or make sense of the world system presented in and by them. Together, they disclose a *theatrum geographicum* in which the places and spaces of our world are made meaningful" (Tally 2017, 485). Not only do maps enable the reader to *know* the space that is at the heart of the narrative (which, as we saw, is Christie's primary objective and the main factor in her approach to mimesis and verisimilitude), but when combined with the narrative they create a *theatrum*, a theatrical place meant for representation and observation. The reader will look at, analyse and interpret the map of the characters' enclosed world in the same way he would the enclosed scenic space, looking for the human activity, the way each character is separated from or close to the others, and what it reveals about the characters and the story – looking, indeed, for meaning and signification within the closed space.

Indeed, in addition to making the story more verisimilar, the maps enable communication and interaction with the reader. As the reader discovers new clues and tries to solve the mystery, he or she has to refer to the map, not only to understand the topography of the setting but to test his theories: could this character have been in this room at the time of the murder? Where was this other character? In Sarnelli's words,

Christie's fiction and her recurrent use of maps activate the reader response, creating the spatiality of reading. [...] This constant movement across the pages establishes the spatiality of reading. The act of reading [...] becomes a deeply spatial event. (Sarnelli 2017-8, 55, 133)

Adding maps to her closed circle stories enables Christie to spatialise her mysteries. Christie makes the reader transform a static, two-dimensional representation of a fictional space into a dynamic stage of sorts where the reader actively imagines the characters' movements – this technique, in short, actualises the setting and makes it more lifelike. It is worth noting that Christie only ever gives maps of settings that are archetypal and easily identifiable to the reader. As a result, the reader models his imaginative reconstruction of the setting on real places that he/she knows – which effectively gives the setting the “illusion of truth to life.” In addition to this mimetic effect, the addition of diagrams is also an efficient way of delimiting space: the reader is never more aware that the story is contained within the four walls of a house (or a train, etc.) and isolated from the rest of the world than when the entire setting of the story can be contained in a small map.

In order to understand how diagrams work as regards *mimesis* and how they activate the reader response, let us look at two examples representative of Christie's maps in general (see annex D). *Styles* presents the reader with two maps: the first one is a map of the first floor of Styles Court, the second represents the victim's bedroom (see Annex D1). In *Mesopotamia* Christie includes a diagram of the expedition house (see Annex D2). The second map mostly aims to show that the candle-grease stain on the floor is very close to the writing desk, which indicates that whoever was in the room when the victim died was mostly interested in the desk. The first map in *Styles* and the map in *Mesopotamia* are much more interesting as far as the closed circle ploy is concerned.

The first interest of these two maps is that it gives more information about the two settings and the groups they enclose. In *Styles* for instance, the reader learns that the house has a classical U-shape. The fact that the house is very typical in its architecture makes the reader aware that this setting obeys real-life rules he knows, which, in turns, enables him to analyse the setting and its clues through the lens of his experience and deduce things about the characters. For instance, Styles is a big estate: there are eleven rooms, including four spare. This indicates that the family is wealthy enough to possess a large country house and to house a big family, even though the Cavendish-Inglethorp family is not that large; it is also an implicit clue that the house is most likely ancestral and that the Cavendishes are the local squires. The family all live together, which indicates a high level of intimacy, but also perhaps of frustration, since the matriarch is described early on as domineering. The map also reveals

a polarity within the family: the children, daughter-in-law and children's friend live on one side of the house, while the Inglethorps and Cynthia (the victim's protégée) live on the other side, which indicates a division within the family (that the rest of the novel will prove true). This separation hints at a lack of unity. By showing the spatial organisation of the house, the novel *Mesopotamia* similarly reveals the tensions between characters in an implicit manner. The house gives an overall impression of order: its square shape as well as the near-identical arrangement of the rooms on each side of the house (bedrooms on the West and East sides, living spaces and working spaces on the North and South sides) make the house look symmetrical and thus harmonious. This apparent symmetry is even insisted upon in the textual description of the house's organisation: "The bedrooms were all the same, each with a window and a door giving on to the courtyard" (Christie 2001b, 52); "the arrangement of rooms was much the same on the other side" (*ibid.*, 53). This emphasis on continuity and sameness is on par with the fact that most of the bedrooms are of similar size. Nevertheless, this apparent lack of prevailing hierarchy that should rhyme with equality is overthrown by the fact that Mrs Leidner and Father Lavigny both reside in strikingly larger bedrooms than the rest of the household. Mrs Leidner's position in particular is relevant given the domineering qualities other characters attribute to her in the novel. Beneath the appearances, this diagram actually reveals an intense polarisation between the characters. The most striking aspect of this polarisation is the fact that all the elements of the house seem in constant opposition, as if torn between two extremes. As in *Styles*, some characters live in the left side of the room while others live on the right side, thus driving a wedge between the characters as they are physically separated by the courtyard. In fact, a quick look at the location of the doors of each room reveals that every character must cross this courtyard (and thus, go outside) in order to go to any given room – one might notice that very few rooms are actually connected to one another. In addition to being rather inconvenient, this perpetual circulation through the courtyard hints at a lack of cohesion within the household while the lack of communication between the rooms suggests that the group is separated and communication is severed. The only rooms that are connected (the office with the dining room, the living room with the antika room) are yet another reminder of the polarisation of the household, as the personal and the professional are awkwardly assorted, making the house a gauche mix of a home and a working place (and the enclosed group a similarly odd mix between a household and a group of colleagues). This strange combination of the public and the private raises questions about this group that lives in a shared intimacy yet seems to be subject to tensions (see 3.1.). This division in the group is also hinted at by the architecture of the house itself:

while it follows the pattern of the ideal Occidental (and more precisely English) country house, it is built in the Orient – in fact, the narrator also explains that this is an “original Arab house” that has been expanded upon, Christie 2001b, 52). By imitating real-life architectural and organisational conventions that the reader is familiar with, Christie gives verisimilitude to a two-dimensional setting: the reader can navigate it, interpret it, and use it to understand the dynamics of the enclosed group. In addition to making the background of the story more tangible to the reader (which makes the diagram a very effective way to describe the setting vividly yet without words), it also emphasises the extreme importance of the enclosed setting within the closed circle mystery.

Indeed, in addition to crucial providing information on the enclosed group’s whereabouts and situation, the map is meant to be studied as a clue. For instance, one of the major events in *Styles* is that someone was in Mrs Inglethorp’s bedroom as she was dying. A close analysis of the map enables the reader to suspect whom. Indeed, it is strange that Cynthia – who lives in the bedroom next to the victim’s – did not hear Mrs Inglethorp utter a single sound, yet Mary, whose bedroom is in the other wing, declared she heard the victim. This is an important indication that Mary was the one in the bedroom: in theory, people should have seen Mary run in the corridors to the victim’s bedroom when everyone else did, yet she was not seen. The map may also add to the mystery: in *Mesopotamia* for instance, the map highlights that Mrs Leidner’s room had very few openings – only a door that Nurse Leatheran was watching and two barred windows. The map makes this enclosure look more tangible, as the reader is meant to puzzle over the diagram and wonder where the murderer could have come from or how he/she could have left the room.

The reader is indeed meant to analyse the map to verify the suspects’ alibis, to determine whether or not they had an opportunity to commit the crime, and to analyse their comings and goings. Some novels give particular attention to these comings and goings, to determine where each character was at every point in time: in *Clouds*, for instance, an entire chapter is devoted to analysing a map of the plane to determine which passengers could have killed Mme Giselle with a blowpipe from where they were sitting.²⁹

²⁹ The drafts of Christie’s map of the plane have been preserved. It is interesting to notice that in the initial draft, Norman Gale sat next to the bathroom; in the novel, Gale pretends to go to the bathroom but actually uses this pretence to disguise himself as a steward and go and poison Mme Giselle with a needle. In the final map, Gale has to walk down the plane to go to the bathroom. As a result, the solution of the mystery is less obvious and many characters can attest that they saw him go there and come back a few minutes later, which *seems* to innocent him. These drafts attest to the importance of movements within the enclosed setting, as they can make a character look more suspicious or less so; Christie had to carefully choose each suspect’s location.

However, the reader must interpret the map correctly. While the map gives clues, it can also make the reader suspect characters who are innocent: in *Styles* for instance, instead of suspecting Mary (or in addition to suspecting her), the reader may be suspicious of Cynthia, as the map makes very clear that Cynthia's bedroom has a door leading to the victim's room. Like every other device in Christie's closed circle mysteries, the map aims to make everyone look equally suspect. Alternatively, Evie seems to be excluded from the list of suspects because the servants' quarters are not represented on the map. The clue may be well hidden: in *Orient Express*, the map – in addition to helping the reader see where each character was – only gives one real clue: that Mrs Hubbard has a berth with an uneven number and that in consequence the door opens in a certain way that makes one of her declarations a lie. To quote Sarnelli once again, “it is up to the reader to fill in the details” (Sarnelli 2017-8, 139) and to find which details are relevant and what they really mean.³⁰

Adding maps to the story thus fulfils several purposes: it adds verisimilitude to a genre that has to rely on unspecific descriptions; it helps actualising the setting; it makes the reader participate in the game (see Part 1.4.1.); and it draws attention to the movements of the suspects within the enclosed space, which in turn fulfils the closed circle's mission to make every character look equally suspect. For this reason, maps are an important feature of Christie's closed circle mysteries exclusively. However, even though maps give the reader a verisimilar description of the enclosed space, this map and this enclosed space still have to be interpreted. It is thus both a mimetic representation of reality and a sign that this representation is never enough — it points to the “impossible narrative” on which Eisenzweig grounds his definition of the genre (Eisenzweig 1986, 53). It is the reality of the genre itself – and not only its realism – that is at stake. Because the genre itself is a narrative impossibility, Christie's closed circles – the enclosure of which is the epitome of the genre's artificiality – can only be given the *suggestion* of verisimilitude, by using two tools that are either non-novelistic (the theatrical use of the enclosed space) or non-narrative (the inclusion of diagrams). The inclusion of verisimilar elements only fits one purpose: for the reader to recognize the diegetic world and its rules, meaning that he can identify irregularities and clues. For all intents and purposes, the fictional field is cut off from reality – not unlike the setting itself which is more often than not isolated from the rest of the diegetic world.

³⁰ The fact that they must be interpreted means that maps embody the deduction game in its purest essence. As in Poe's “Purloined Letter, as analysed by Lacan, there are three manners of reading the mystery: there are those who are unable to see the hidden-in-plain-sight solution (the characters and the duped reader), those who interpret the map correctly (the detective and the astute reader), and those who know from the start what the trick is because they committed it (the murderer, and the writer). (Felman 1987, 41) A map reads similarly.

2.3. The isolation of the closed setting

2.3.1. “Outside of time and normality”³¹: seclusion and its dangers

As I have explained in 2.1.1., Christie’s favourite method of enclosure consists of completely isolating the setting from the rest of the world, either by making it extremely remote or by cutting off its communication with the outside world. This method is used in a majority of Christie’s closed circle mysteries (*None, Orient Express, Mesopotamia, Appointment, Nile, Evil...*). But I argue that isolation – or perhaps more exactly seclusion, i.e. the fact of *willingly* keeping away from other people in a quest for privacy – more than simply being a recurrent technique of Christie’s, is actually a *defining and inherent* characteristic of every one of Christie’s enclosed settings, even when the setting is not completely inaccessible or remote. First, I would like to demonstrate that the main characteristic of Christie’s settings is their geographical seclusion – i.e., they have minimal contact with the outside world even before the murder, which facilitates their enclosure. Secondly, I will argue that this physical seclusion makes Christie’s enclosed settings extremely sheltered and private, thus giving a false sense of safety that is shattered by the murder and giving the boundary between inside and outside (a boundary that the closed circle subgenre entirely depends on) an ambiguous function.

It is important to notice that Christie depicts first and foremost a world in which very little exists outside of the enclosed setting. This fact is emphasised by the similarity between the setting and the classical dramatic stage: the stage is effectively cut off from the world, since it is strictly delimited and most of the action is confined to the limits of the stage. Even the maps, the purpose of which is to make the setting more tangible to the reader, “add to the sense of isolation and are, in fact, related to the locked-room ploy, for they pose the question: it was done, but how could it have been?” (Bargainnier 1980, 25). Indeed, maps highlight a single setting to focus on, excluding everything located beyond its four walls; they also emphasise the fact that the culprit can only be found within its boundaries. This can be seen in *Mesopotamia*, for instance: the map emphasises the complete enclosure of the setting by representing it as a completely closed square, which makes the expedition house look like a finite world (see Annex D). As a result, the world outside of these boundaries is of very little interest: everything in the diegesis happens inside the enclosed space, and if the post-murder

³¹ Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Basingstoke, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), 165.

investigation were to take place outside of the enclosed space, it is still on the enclosed space that the detective and the reader focus all their efforts on.

This lack of interest for the outside world can be observed in all of Christie's closed circle mysteries. As a general rule, no place other than the enclosed setting is ever mentioned and the whole novel usually takes place in the enclosed setting itself. No one ever comes from the outside world, except for the detective and the police. As noticed in 2.1.1., this is ideal for Golden Age detective fiction: not only does it enable the story to remain focused on the mystery, but it also makes the reader and the detective stand on equal ground as far as their chances to solve the mystery is concerned. However, the exclusion of the outside world goes farther than that. Elements of the real world are very rarely mentioned – which is in keeping with the fact that detective fiction, as a game, has an ambiguous relationship with reality: the rules of the game can hardly fit with those of the real world, especially since enclosure is inherently artificial.

More largely, Christie seldom makes any remark on the historical context of her novels. Most of the time, no context is ever mentioned, which makes her mysteries look frozen in time and a-temporal: in *Orient Express* for instance, there seems to be no context even though the novel was written in 1934, at a time when Europe was rife with conflict. One would expect this fact to have an impact on a novel with a multinational cast travelling throughout troubled areas; instead, the context goes unmentioned, making the story timeless and everything outside the mystery irrelevant. In fact, historical context is only ever mentioned for one of two reasons. The first one is to allow Christie to reflect on modernity and the passing of time. This often occurs in the later Miss Marple novels, and occasionally in a few Poirot novels: in *Curtain*, Hastings thus mentions that “Styles St. Mary was altered out of all recognition. Petrol stations, a cinema, two more inns and rows of council houses” (Christie 2002a, 10) and that his room “was furnished in a cheap modern style” (*ibid.*, 15). These negative remarks on modernity criticise and try to cancel the evolution towards modernity in order to remain in a static, utopian bubble. Nevertheless, they give very little clue as to when the novel takes place (it could be any time post-World War Two) or what is going on in the wide world. The second exception is when Christie makes use of wars for plot purposes. For instance, in *Christmas*, Pilar Estravados' maid uses her mistress' death, caused by a bombing in Civil War-plagued Spain, to take her place and pretend to be Simeon Lee's granddaughter; similar plotlines are used in *Peril at End House* and *Taken with the Flood* using World War Two. War serves as a plot device but is otherwise left out from the plot entirely, as if nothing important were occurring outside the walls of the enclosed setting. This statement is best

exemplified in *Styles*: Hastings comes to Styles to rest after being injured in the French trenches in the First World War and Poirot is a war refugee, yet the peaceful little world of Styles St. Mary and Styles Court is completely untroubled by the war – in fact, Styles Court’s peace is more troubled by the murder than by the war. Hastings, the narrator, only makes a fleeting mention of the political climate, and only to notice how remote Styles St. Mary is from the rest of the world and its agitation:

The village of Styles St. Mary was situated about two miles from the little station, and Styles Court lay a mile the other side of it. It was a still, warm day in early July. As one looked out over the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost impossible to believe that, not so very far away, a great war was running its appointed course. I felt I had suddenly strayed into another world. (Christie 2007, 13)

Styles Court is “another world” indeed, for it is removed from the rest of the world on several levels. The village, Styles St. Mary, is located in the Essex countryside away from the war, but also from the rest of England: its being “two miles from the little [train] station” effectively cuts it off from the rest of England and reduces communications. In addition to that, Styles Court itself is at a distance from the village. The setting is thus socially isolated even before the murder: it is disconnected from England but also from the nearby village, thus making its enclosure at the time of the murder very easy.

The same goes not only for the country house type of setting, but also for every one of Christie’s settings. Shared accommodations are usually located in similarly secluded places, usually in the countryside (the guest house in *Curtain*, for example, is Styles itself) or occasionally the desert (*Mesopotamia*); in the case of murders committed in a single room, the room in question is often situated in a country house setting (*Tragedy*). Houses, flats and various places located in London are usually situated in little-frequented or exclusive residential areas (the house in *Crooked House*, in addition to possessing immense gates, is one of those; the restaurant in *Sparkling Cyanide* is socially exclusive). Even exterior settings are usually reserved for the characters’ single use, as in *Appointment*. Two types of setting in particular emphasise this seclusion. Means of transportation are inherently secluded, in virtue of their perpetually oscillating from one point to another without stop: they never stay in a single place, and when they do, they are either snowbound in an undefined place (*Orient Express*) or immobilised in a foreign place that remains mostly unknown to the characters and readers (*Orient Express, Nile*). Train, boat and plane are all no-man’s lands, always treading in foreign places and always impossible to locate precisely; their constant movement from and to civilisation removes them from it. Similarly, islands are separated from civilisation,

surrounded but by the wild sea or ocean without any portion of land communicating with the continent, which makes them ideally self-contained.

What is interesting is that this seclusion and self-containment are *not* contingent on the murder; in fact, they are the *reason* why Christie chooses such settings to begin with. Because they are finite, already isolated, and easy to isolate and lock even further, they are ideal for the closed circle setting. In addition, they enable her to create the “centered world” Malmgren deems necessary for detective fiction (see 2.2.) What detective fiction, and more especially the closed circle, requires is a world that is

at once orderly, stable, resistant to change, and relatively free of contingency. [...] Mystery presupposes an essentially static world, in which neither social order nor human nature is subject to radical change. Indeed, this guarantee of continuity and permanence is one of the real consolations of the form. (Malmgren 2001, 14)

What Christie needs, in other words, is a simplified, unchanging world, removed from any disruptions that could take away from the mystery or complicate it, a setting that “abstracts the story from the complexity and confusion of the larger social world and provides a rationale for avoiding the consideration of [...] more complex problems of social injustice and group conflict” (Cawelti 1976, 97). What is at stake, here, is the preservation of the genre as pure mystery and nothing else. The setting must be apart from the outside world that is characterised by chaos, change, accidents and randomness, unacceptable in a novel in which everything must be relevant to the mystery and there must be “some sort of correspondence between external appearances and internal realities” (Malmgren 2001, 17). The story must also conform to a certain social order that ensures that the formula works: at the end, the murderer has to be found and punished and the society which was thrown into disorder by the murder has to go back unchanged to its former state of peace.³² In other words, the story *cannot* imply that the order in place is corrupt or flawed; for this reason, the setting must belong to a traditional (even conservative) world, a world that necessarily has to be distanced from the real world where politics and social change complicate matters of justice, hierarchy and morals. These necessities impact the choice of setting, for, as W.H. Auden explained in “The Guilty Vicarage,” an essay that theorizes the classical detective formula:

It must appear to be an innocent society in a state of grace, *i.e.*, a society where there is no need of the law, no contradiction between the aesthetic individual and the ethical universal, and where murder, therefore, is the unheard-of act which precipitates a crisis

³² Although, as I will demonstrate in Part 3.3. of this *mémoire*, Christie does not quite obey this principle, as the societies she depicts are far from being fundamentally peaceful and order is occasionally questioned. The very fact that conflicts appear even in this supposed ideal of stability suggests that the genre also deals with implicit social critique.

(for it reveals that some member has fallen and is no longer in a state of grace). (Auden 1974, 403)

The setting that best answers these requirements is the country house – a classic of Golden Age detective fiction. These characteristics are best exhibited in the excerpt from *Styles* quoted above. Styles St. Mary is the embodiment of the idealised countryside: everything there is “green and peaceful,” “flat,” “warm” and almost dreamlike. Hastings feels like he has “strayed into another world” and with good reason: this society is but an idyllic, pastoral landscape where war (and indeed murder) seems unthinkable, for everything is ordered and proper – so much so that it betrays how artificial Styles and Styles St. Mary are.

What Styles St. Mary is – and what, as an extension, Styles itself and every country house in Christie’s novels are – is the embodiment of the *Beau Idéal* as defined by Leonore Davidoff, Jeanne L’Esperance and Howard Newby in their article “*Landscape with Figures: Home and Community in English Society.*” The *Beau Idéal* is a specifically English trope dating from the 18th century and still actively in use today, in literature as in the universal vision of the English countryside. According to this ideal, the village setting is “the ideal setting for relationships in the wider society” (Davidoff et al. 1995, 42) and the “home in a rural village community” (*ibid.*) is the best embodiment of this ideal. Emphasising traditional, simpler relationships (*ibid.*, 43), this ideally small world enables the prevalence of stability, traditional authority, and conservative hierarchy, in stark opposition with “an increasingly troublesome, impersonal and alienating real world” (*ibid.*, 44). For this reason, John Cavendish describes the life in Styles as “the idle life,” “a jolly good life” (Christie 2007, 13); and Hastings fondly remembers his first stay at Styles as a boy, thus making explicit the feeling of pastoral nostalgia for lost innocence that pervades Styles and, more generally, rural England. Styles is a chimeric relic of another time, which makes it even more unreal and removed from reality and civilisation. Indeed, rural England is held as the only place where to retrieve a harmony long-lost in civilisation *expressly* because it is entirely cut off from civilisation: the home and the village are both “ideally sheltered and separated from the public life of power – political, economic, educational, scientific” (*ibid.*, 42); moreover, “the home and the village community were not merely geographical expressions, since the physical boundaries were also cognitive boundaries, limiting aspirations and ideas about what was possible and desirable” (*ibid.*, 44).

Every closed setting chosen by Christie works similarly: not only do they present cognitive boundaries that make them a world apart, self-contained and different from the outside world, but they all are – at least in appearance – ideal, Eden-like worlds. The Orient Express, the *Nile*

steamer, the restaurant in *Sparkling Cyanide*, the plane in *Clouds*, the boarding school in *Cat Among the Pigeons* or the hotel in *Evil*, and even Shaitana's flat in *Cards* are all places of glamour and luxury where only a select few are admitted. They are places one has to pay for or to be invited in – which, according to Michel Foucault's definition, makes them heterotopias and thus sets them apart from the rest of the world.

I have already explained in Part 2.1.2. that Christie's settings correspond to Foucault's concept of heteretopia: her settings are always 'other' and they all serve a very specific function in society (giving characters a home or a shelter, travelling, etc.). In addition, heterotopias are enclosed and isolated:

Les hétérotopies supposent toujours un système d'ouverture et de fermeture qui, à la fois, les isole et les rend pénétrables. En général, on n'accède pas à un emplacement hétérotopique comme dans un moulin. Ou bien on y est contraint, c'est le cas de la caserne, le cas de la prison, ou bien il faut se soumettre à des rites et à des purifications. On ne peut y entrer qu'avec une certaine permission et une fois qu'on a accompli un certain nombre de gestes. (Foucault 1967)

Heterotopias are removed from society, which makes them exceptional places (unless their exceptional quality means that they *have to* be secluded and secret). They represent an ideal embodiment of the social compound that only a few privileged few can access. The ritual of purification, in Christie's case, consists of obtaining an invite into this exceptional world. A place in the Orient Express or a cruise ship, a room in a prestigious hotel or boarding school, or an invitation to a select party require first and foremost a precious sesame that only money, social privilege, or well-connected acquaintances can grant. In other words, one has to prove that he or she is worthy of being admitted into this special world. The access is restricted because the settings' exceptionalism resides in that they are ideal worlds:

Ou bien elles ont pour rôle de créer un espace d'illusion qui dénonce comme plus illusoire encore tout l'espace réel, tous les emplacements à l'intérieur desquels la vie humaine est cloisonnée. [...] Ou bien, au contraire, créant un autre espace, un autre espace réel, aussi parfait, aussi méticuleux, aussi bien arrangé que le nôtre est désordonné, mal agencé et brouillon. (*ibid.*)

Christie's settings, like heterotopias, give the illusion of absolute perfection – they are places for glamour, luxury, and social prestige. In comparison, the outside world appears unbearably chaotic, but also plagued by the unauthenticity of modernity. Christie's heterotopias are thus another embodiment of the *Beau Idéal*, for they are idyllic spaces that theoretically allow for escapism – except that her heterotopias are actually places for danger, just like the *Beau Idéal*.

Indeed, all these settings are isolated on three different levels: firstly, they are isolated geographically by their being enclosed, by their remoteness and by their distance from

civilisation; secondly, they are isolated cognitively, for they are conferred a special status and are regarded as superior places, utopias of sorts that are self-sufficient and exceptional; and finally, they are isolated socially by their lack of contact with the outside – they do not open to outsiders and communicate with the outside only to let the chosen ones in. These three types of seclusion are dangerous in Christie’s novels. Several decades before her, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle’s Sherlock Holmes stated that small villages remote from civilisation represent a danger, for in the absence of social interaction one no longer feels concerned with society and its laws and eventually does what one pleases, including criminal deeds (see Part 1.2.2.). Christie, influenced by Conan Doyle, states exactly the same opinion in her novels: “People who’ve lived outside civilisation a good deal sometimes go back. Revert. Whatever you call it” (Christie 2002f, 33).

In Christie’s novels and most especially her closed circle novels, danger always comes from the community closing themselves off and having limited contact with the outside world. Each secluded community, no matter how ideal it seems to be, always hides a terrible truth beneath the utopian appearance; even in the peaceful village, one will find “envy, of course, and malice, and all the mean spiteful little sins” (Christie 2002e, 83), the little everyday vices that Miss Marple loves to detect: gossip, lies, theft, infidelity... In the enclosed community that is at the core of Christie’s novels, these little everyday sins eventually turn into murder. Davidoff, L’Esperance and Newby themselves emphasise that there is always something rotten in the *Beau Idéal* community:

In each case there was an ugly, exploitative underside which it was the purpose of the ideology to overlook and deny. Paternalism easily became either overbearing officiousness or even tyranny; on the other hand it could justify self-centered neglect of subordinates’ welfare. Self-sufficiency became isolation, close-knit sociability lapsed into cruel gossip. (Davidoff et al. 1995, 45)

Christie capitalises on this “ugly, exploitative underside” of the rural English community. In *Styles*, the Cavendish-Inglethorp family is socially isolated from the village: they are the local squires and the traditional hierarchy found in the *Beau Idéal* means that they are looked up to by the local population. Hastings thus mentions that “It was only human nature to endeavour to please “The Hall”” (Christie 2007, 141). This privileged community is not held as normal but as extraordinary, which creates a sense of exceptionalism but also of individualism – for instance, not once does any character of *Styles* interact with the villagers. This behaviour is pointed out and criticised in *Towards Zero*: “You take all the good things of life for granted. You’re happy and superior in your little roped-off enclosure shut off from the common herd. You look at people like me as though I were one of the animals outside!” (Christie 1991, 87).

For Christie, exceptionalism and individualism are the root of crime, as she explains several times in her novels but most strikingly in *Crooked House*:

But some people, I suspect, remain morally immature. They continue to be aware that murder is wrong, but they do not feel it. I don't think, in my experience, that any murderer has really felt remorse... And that, perhaps, is the mark of Cain. Murderers are set apart, they are 'different' – murder is wrong – but not for them – for them it is necessary – the victim has 'asked for it,' it was 'the only way'. (Christie 1986, 110)

The Cavendish-Inglethorp “paternalism” (read: sense of responsibility over the locals, conferred to them by the social hierarchy of the *Beau Idéal*) eventually makes the culprits feel superior to the rest of society, as if the common law did not apply to them – which, as I wrote in 2.1.2., is a defining trait of heterotopias as defined by Foucault. It is striking, in this specific case, that the murder is committed not by one of the heirs, but by the *parvenu* husband and the servant: because they belong to this enclosed community cut off from civilisation, they feel second-hand superiority and eventually grant themselves the right to kill.³³

To summarise, Christie’s use of the trope of the *Beau Idéal* is a double-edge sword: while on the one hand it grants her the perfect setting for her closed circle mysteries, it also allows her to criticise this ideal and to show that evil is everywhere under the sun, as she says herself in *Evil*. It is relevant to notice that the rise of the social-problem novel in the 18th-century is contingent to the rise of the *Beau Idéal* (the latter being an imaginary construction of an ideal society, as opposed to the evils of society); in her novels, Christie uses the *Beau Idéal* only to emphasise how illusory it is. In the end, the enclosed society in Styles or in Gorston Hall (in *Christmas*) are no better than those of the *Crooked House* in London, of the *Karnak* in *Nile*, of Shaitana’s and Rosemary Barton’s parties in *Cards* and *Sparkling Cyanide* or of the student hostel in *Hickory*. All of them are just as secluded and just as corrupted as the others.

Indeed, Christie’s other settings work exactly like her country house settings, even if they are more exotic, or more urban, or more glamorous, or intended for travellers or guests rather than for a family. Exceptionalism and individualism pervade all of her enclosed settings – where, notably, only a few lower-class characters are to be found, not only because they do not fit the ‘glamorous’ ideal of the setting but because, by the rules of detective fiction,

³³ There is a paradox there: while the novel insists that the murder stems from family problems, in the end it is not a member of the family *per se* who committed the murder. The novel criticizes the inherent evil in ideal places, but the solution puts the blame on an outsider of sorts, which only reinforces social cohesion. How to reconcile these two extremes, and why does Christie eventually choose this solution? This seems like an attempt on Christie’s end to provide – at least at the start of her career – a solution that is not too outwardly upsetting on a social perspective. This choice displays a willingness to eventually bring back order, a willingness that Christie will not display as much later on.

servants are deemed of very little interest (see Annex B, rule 11). The roots of exceptionalism and individualism are once again to be found in the setting's and community's seclusion. First of all, the other settings, be they a boarding school, a hotel or a train, are places of privilege accessible only to characters that are socially superior. What is more, the apparent peace in these settings is quickly shattered *because* their seclusion from civilisation makes them places where authority is fragile or absent and where rules and laws have less impact.

Trains for instance are a “no-man’s-land”, as Anna Madoeuf aptly describes them:

Standing irresolutely between two places that serve only as landmarks, the train is temporarily in what is clearly an incongruous no-man’s-land, in a landscape that is also a negation, that no longer exists because it is nothing but a shapeless mass of snow, white on white, matter on matter. [...] [T]he actions and setting are in phase with the train, which is in a state of equilibrium and disequilibrium between two suspended worlds and two poles, one the impulse driving it from Istanbul station, and the other inexorably pulling it towards its final destination [...] (Madoeuf 2016, 59)

Trains, boats and plane exist in a vacuum: they are secluded places but they are paradoxically embedded into a larger, open space (whereas, as seen in 2.1.1., Christie usually cumulates enclosed settings embedded into each other), they enclose characters but cross all boundaries, do not belong to any place among the many they cross, and do not fall under the jurisdiction of either place (which poses a legal dilemma in *Orient Express*). They travel where people cannot settle or live, like deserts, and only stop at stations and airports, transitory spaces that people cannot inhabit.³⁴ This type of setting exists outside of stable society; it is a place where multiple nationalities, each with their own codes and rules, co-exist, as evidenced in chapter four of *Orient Express* when Poirot, on his way to his berth, keeps meeting different people from different nationalities, as if geography and borders did not exist in this place. These settings are thus, according to Madoeuf, a “somewhere that is nowhere” (*ibid.*, 58), a bounded space that abolishes the notion of boundary. These spaces exist outside of civilisation – hence the idea that common rules do not apply there.

Similarly, islands are peculiar worlds, especially in literature. Their remoteness makes them ideal places to start over freely, away from the eye of society. Indeed, David Floyd explains that they are entirely defined by their separateness from and opposition to the rest of

³⁴ Siobhan Carroll defines both these types of space as “atopias”, i.e. spaces “antithetical to habitable place” (Carroll 2017, 159). There are natural atopias, “like the ocean, Antarctica, or outer space, the environmental characteristics of [which] not only make it hard to build in these spaces [...] but also make them inherently dangerous to human life” (*ibid.*). Manmade atopias (“airports, highways, and chain stores”) are also called non-spaces by Marc Augé, who argues that they “interfer[e] with a fundamental human relationship to place, and thus, with individual and communal identity” (*ibid.*). In other words, settings such as the train, the boat or the plane (which are manmade atopias, i.e. non-spaces) only ever cross places where civilisation and communal life are fundamentally impossible.

the world: they are “a landmass separated from the mainland,” “separated from normative societal structures,” and completely opposed to the sea – an untameable entity that the island serves as a refuge from (Floyd 2014, 88-9). Islands can be a refuge from society as well, when it is tyrannical or oppressive: it becomes Thomas More’s *Utopia* or it enables Robinson Crusoe to discover himself and to grow closer to God. But the distance from society also enables criminal or immoral behaviour to go unseen and unpunished: Ulysses can have extramarital affairs with Circe and Calypso in *The Odyssey*, Prospero can enslave the natives and enact his revenge plot freely in *The Tempest*, schoolboys can experiment with tyranny in *Lord of the Flies* and Dr. Moreau with human/animal hybridization in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (see Kneale 2017 for more details). Islands exist in the margins of civilisation: they are so cut off from the world that society has no means of knowing what happens on them, and thus no one can save the victims. This is the very reason why Wargrave chooses an island in *None*: there, he can become the murderer he could not be while in the civilised world. Islands as literary settings are indeed places for metamorphosis, because of

the persistent potential for the castaway to be altered by the island, for he is essentially thrust into an isolated context without the defining elements of culture and society. [...] The great potential tragedy, therefore, is for the castaway to ‘go native,’ that is, to abandon his former civilized manner and assume an identity so closely associated with the island that he becomes ‘the Wildman.’ (Floyd 2014, 95)

The characters are thus given two options. They can recreate civilisation on the island and thus to sublimate the civilisational experience (*ibid.*). This path is often redemptive: Crusoe for instance goes on a spiritual and religious journey and repents from choosing to be a slave trader. On the other hand, “disengagement” from civilization means that the change can be “degenerative” and regressive (*ibid.*), as in *None*: the characters are “reverting to [...] bestial types” and looking more and more animalistic (see Annex A).

None is the most extreme example of what happens in an isolated setting: isolation means that characters feel emancipated from the law and that the basest instincts of mankind resurface for the worst. This gives Christie’s isolated settings a very ambivalent nature:

There was something magical about an island – the mere word suggested fantasy. You lost touch with the world – an island was *a world of its own*. A world, perhaps, from which you might never return. (Christie 2011, 36; emphasis mine)

The island, like Christie’s other settings, is here very aptly called a “fantasy.” Indeed, those settings are escapist utopias; they are self-contained worlds that their distance from the chaos of the outside world seems to make perfect. But while this self-containment makes them ideal,

it is also what makes them corruptible and “a world [...] from which you might never return.” This double function of isolation raises a paradox: is isolation a protection or a threat, then?

2.3.2. “A world of its own”: the ambiguous function of the boundary

That Christie refers to Soldier Island as “a world of its own” – and, in addition to that, a world “from which you might never return” – is strikingly pertinent. This description in fact fits every single one of Christie’s enclosed settings. As mentioned before, the closed circle subgenre depends entirely on the presence of a physical boundary that separates the enclosed inside and the outside. In effect, this boundary does more than simply delimit two different spatial spheres; it actually establishes the enclosed setting as “a world of its own,” an absolute space that is entirely self-contained. Madoeuf called such a setting “a complete socio-spatial-temporal object” (Madoeuf 2016, 59): an item that is completely autonomous because it is socially, spatially and even temporally (when for instance the times of the murder and of the investigation overlap) isolated from – one could even say *opposed to* – the rest of the world. One might add that the setting is also a complete *cognitive* object (see 2.3.1.).

This isolation enables the setting to stand as an ideal, so removed from reality that the artificiality of detective fiction goes unnoticed (except when or if the text calls attention to it, as with Hastings’s remarks on Styles). The family’s country house, the glamorous train, the island, the student hostel are all stereotypical places, the “Eden-like,” “Great Good Place” Auden deems most desirable because it provides a striking contrast with the act of murder (Auden 1974, 404). They are, as I have mentioned in 2.1.2., places that are in rupture with society and where very specific rules apply. That the setting – and thus the community that inhabits it at the time of the crime – should follow a particular set of rules is in fact necessary for detective fiction and even more so for the closed circle which depends on investigating the communities’ habits:

The detective story writer is also wise to choose a society with an elaborate ritual and to describe this in detail. A ritual is a sign of harmony between the aesthetic and the ethical in which body and mind, individual will and general laws, are not in conflict. The murderer uses his knowledge of the ritual to commit the crime and can be caught only by someone who acquires an equal or superior familiarity with it. (Auden 1974, 403)

The nature of the setting and the frame it is located in inform the reader of the codes and rituals in effect in the community: for instance, in the familial country house located in the *Beau Idéal* rural England, the reader will expect familial love and will understand that all the power naturally belongs to the head of family (usually the *pater familias*) upon which all the

other characters depend, while the domestic staff is naturally subservient and unimportant (Davidoff *et al.* 1995, 44). In other words, the reader will expect conformity to the “ideal” social (and conservative) structure; any departure from it will constitute a clue for the detective. Conversely, if the setting is a means of transportation or a hotel, one will expect decorum, polite conversation and temporary friendships – as the community will go their separate ways at the end of the trip, no lasting attachment should be formed, meaning that murder (which usually reveals that the murderer and the victim actually know each other) comes as a surprise. Each community has its own specific rituals and workings the intimate understanding of which is necessary to solve the mystery, as Sherlock Holmes aptly noticed (see 1.2.): in *Styles* for instance the key of the mystery entirely resides in Emily Inglethorp’s habits – the way she took her medicine, the kind of letters she wrote, the organisation of her bedroom and the fact that she had a chimney fire lit in August. Christie’s suspended settings thus largely depend on convention, which explains why they are so stereotypical: their being conventional means that they look familiar to the reader, who is then able to identify their codes and notice any abnormality, however slight.

Another consequence of the enclosed settings being completely enclosed on themselves and disconnected from the outside world is that they are pitted against this outside world as a safe, private bubble. Christie’s settings systematically appear as a shelter where characters can find refuge. This shelter may protect against physical dangers: the Orient Express shields its passengers from the cold and the snow, the house on Soldier Island is a sanctuary from the storm raging outside. Alternatively, the shelter may also protect from the psychological tensions and pressures of the wide world: Styles Court is a safe haven where the horrors of the war and the trouble of politics can be forgotten; hotels, boarding schools and even restaurants and rooms for parties are places where one can relax and forget about one’s problems. In fact, even when they are not houses, Christie’s settings always convey a homely feeling in one way or another. These places always emphasise personal comfort: even at a party, the characters’ needs and desires are systematically met. They are also usually places where one can sleep, for each person has his or her own bed, and places where each character benefits from a modicum of privacy by way of a specific place (berth or otherwise) being assigned to them (see *Orient Express* and *Nile*). For instance, in *Orient Express*:

The Simplon Orient Express arrived at Belgrade at a quarter to nine that evening. It was not due to depart again until 9.15, so Poirot descended to the platform. He did not, however, remain there long. The cold was bitter, and though the platform itself was protected, heavy snow was falling outside. (Christie 2001c, 47)

In comparison with the cold, snowy and foreign outside – which is, to use Carroll’s term, a natural atopia where man can hardly live – the train seems more welcoming: it is a warm space, and a known one, where Poirot has his own private berth with a warm bed waiting for him, a wagon restaurant to eat in, and people to chat with. The comfort, luxury and protection granted by the train turn it into a space that possesses the attributes of home, even if it is not quite one. The train constitute a temporary home for the time of the trip. It is a place that will bring the characters home (like other means of transportation), that provides enough comfort to be a substitute to an absent home, and that gathers people who often belong to the same family (as in *Nile*, *Mesopotamia*, *Appointment*, *Sparkling Cyanide*...). Finally, all these settings, even if they are not houses, are always laden with clues that are domestic in nature: in *Orient Express*, a kimono robe, a handkerchief, a sponge-bag hanging from a door handle are such clues.

Nevertheless, the homely feeling associated with these places (even when they are atopias or heterotopias) mostly comes from the fact that these settings emphasise privacy – in other words, their aim is to keep away strangers and outsiders. Everyone who does not belong or was not invited is systematically driven away. As we recall, this is the aim the closed circle subgenre strives to achieve: by excluding the possibility that any outsider may have entered the setting, it ensures that all the suspects are identified from the start and can be investigated fairly. As a result, people such as tramps, criminals, foreigners and the working class (the latter two being considered as harbingers of crime), and, generally speaking, unfriendly forces that would disturb the community, are kept out of the private sphere.

According to Gaston Bachelard, it is the protective function (whether real or imagined) of a delimited space that gives it the title of home. Indeed, “all really inhabited space bears the notion of home” (Bachelard 1994, 5); this is reinforced by the imaginative power of man, who will “build ‘walls’ of impalpable shadows, comfort itself with the illusion of protection” (*ibid.*), and because of his attachment to a place’s “protective value” will progressively turn the place in question into an idealised one (*ibid.*, xxxv-xxxvi). In other words, if a place provides enough protection from the outside, one will seek to differentiate it from the rest of the world and to turn it into an ideal refuge. Indeed,

between the house and the non-house it is easy to establish all sorts of contradictions. [...] The house derives reserves and refinements of intimacy from winter; while in the outside world, snow covers all tracks, blurs the road, muffles every sound, conceals all colors. [...] [B]ecause of the diminished entity of the outside world, [one] experiences all the qualities of intimacy with increased intensity. (*ibid.*, 40-1)

The more unwelcoming and frightening the outside world is, the more one will seek to find a home to be protected from it. In Christie's world, where war rages on and modernity is creeping in, and where one is often away from civilisation, it is thus easy to see any enclosed space providing some comfort as home. This is what happens in *Orient Express* in the excerpt quoted above. Poirot is literally surrounded by the snow that "covers all tracks, etc." and turns the landscape into a giant, unidentifiable nothing. The train, by comparison, is much homelier. Enclosure, in this case, brings safety from the literal and metaphorical tempests of the outside of which the snow is a symbol: the setting metaphorically closes the door to any outside intervention such as war, bad weather, or simply undesirables.

This apparent safety reinforces the "dialectic of division" between inside and outside (*ibid.*, 211) that is at play in Christie's closed circle mysteries – a dynamic directly inherited from Conan Doyle (see 1.2.1). At first glance, seclusion seems ideal, for it isolates man from the fury of the frightening outside world. After all, Bachelard remarks, "Life begins well, it begins enclosed, protected, all warm in the bosom of the house" (*ibid.*, 7): in this light, enclosure is a protection and it is desirable. The trouble is that it drives the enclosed community – cognitively united in their desire for protection and by their belonging to the same, closely-knit group – to isolate itself from the outside world even more:

The more cut-off, the more 'total' this situation, the greater the likelihood that the definition will remain coherent and thus order and stability maintained; 'outside agitators' were not welcome [...]. (Davidoff *et al.* 1995, 44)

What the characters seek, then, is "total" isolation – social, physical, cognitive. This isolation is thought to exclude unwelcome outsiders and thus to maintain order. The problem is that, as we have seen above, isolation not only leads the enclosed community to individualism and even exceptionalism but also prevents the enclosed community from receiving outside help when needed – which is often the reason why Christie's murderers choose to commit their murders in enclosed settings, like Wargrave in *None* or the murderers in *Orient Express*.

What this separation with the outside world (and thus, civilisation and laws) also induces is the growing of tensions within the enclosed community. Indeed, when a community remains secluded, problems arise. It is relevant that the community is always isolated and kept separate from the rest of the world *even before the murder is committed*; while enclosure at the time of the murder makes certain that the murderer can only be found inside, troubles actually predate the murder and even lead to it. Instead of protecting the group from danger, isolation actually contributes to create a dangerous situation where murder can and will occur, *and* it creates a proximity with crime that is as undesirable as it is dangerous (see 3.2.1.).

Davidoff *et al.* noticed this major flaw of isolation: there is an “ugly, exploitative underside” (*ibid.*, 45) in the *Beau Idéal*’s secluded, hierarchical community – and by extension in all communities that are similar. As Davidoff *et al.* explained, the conservative structure of society places gives one person absolute power over all the others. This power is uncontested (because it is seen as normal and even desirable in a conservative, ideal society) and unchecked, for the group’s isolation means that no outside authority with higher powers can ever witness the ongoing abuse of power. Privacy from public scrutiny allows heads of family (or whoever has power in Christie’s settings) to use their family and servants as they see fit. Wives, children, and servants are completely subordinated and “this subordination did not matter when set beside the domestic and rural idyll” (*ibid.*, 45) – whatever abuse they may suffer from (be it physical, sexual, verbal or emotional) is overlooked, ignored, and denied in order to prevent the perfect utopia from falling into pieces. In general, however, the abuse is unnoticed: isolation prevents people from witnessing the abuse, and it also prevents the victims from reaching out for help or from escaping. The most extreme example of this problem is the Boynton family in *Appointment*: it is explicitly stated that Mrs Boynton lives a secluded life in order to completely control her children, far from the interferences of the outside world.

In all of Christie’s closed circle novels, the dissatisfaction (at best) and abuse (at worst) generated by the all-powerful local authority create tension long before the story even starts. In *Styles*, the Cavendish-Inglethorp’s problems predate the murder: the two sons, John and Lawrence, are resentful of their step-mother’s control over their money and that upon her death this money might go to Mrs Inglethorp’s new, good-for-nothing husband instead of them. Similarly, in *Christmas*, every character is resentful of Simeon Lee’s abuse – be it his tyrannical behaviour, his avarice, his manipulation or his licentious ways. In *Nile*, Jacqueline’s fiancé Simon marries Linnet instead of Jacqueline because Linnet has all the money he desires. In *Cards*, the head of the house, Shaitana, knows about the murders four of his guests committed. In all these novels, these problems are domestic and/or stemming from the abuse of a person in power whose actions are unchecked and unquestioned; these problems lead first to tension within the enclosed community, and eventually to murder.³⁵ Similarly, the simple fact of spending too much time enclosed together without seeing anyone else leads to “cliques and rivalries and jealousies” as Christie writes in *Mesopotamia* (Christie 2001b, 27): “If people are too much cooped up together it’s got a way of getting on their

³⁵ I will analyse the enclosed community and its tensions in more detail in Chapter Three of this *mémoire*.

nerves. [...] Yes, one tends to get petty in close communities [...].” (*ibid.*, 27-8). In Christie’s novels, this pettiness always leads to murder.

The isolated, enclosed inside is thus not as safe and idyllic as one thought. In fact, their very enclosure seems to make them even more vulnerable. The homelike space (or, at the very least, the temporary substitute for a home) thus turns from an imagined Heaven into a nightmarish, but very real, Hell:

In fact, of course, the household could be not only an ‘earthly paradise’ but its opposite, a ‘hell on earth,’ a prison. [...] The fact that no other external relationships were sanctioned for its inmates, at least below the rank of master, could make men tyrants over their wives, mothers over their daughters and both over their younger children and servants. The home could be not only a walled garden but also a stifling menagerie of evil forces unchecked by interference from any higher authority. (Davidoff *et al.* 195, 58)

In the closed circle mysteries, the “dialectic of division” that separates the outside sphere from the inside, private sphere is thus reversed and subverted. The safe inside that was supposed to free the characters from the pressures and dangers of the outside world becomes a prison, “a net ensnaring the characters” (Madoeuf 2016, 55) from which they cannot escape. This is best exemplified in *Christmas* with the character of Lydia Lee. Lydia’s hobby is building dioramas in the Gorston Hall’s garden:

One represented a desert scene with smooth yellow sand, a little clump of green palm trees in coloured tin, and a procession of camels with one or two little Arab figures. Some primitive mud houses had been constructed of plasticine. There was an Italian garden with terraces and formal beds with flowers in coloured sealing-wax. There was an Arctic one, too, with clumps of green glass for icebergs, and a little cluster of penguins. Next came a Japanese garden with a couple of beautiful little stunted trees, looking-glass arranged for water, and bridges modelled out of plasticine. (Christie 2001a, 30)

Lydia Lee is trapped in her father-in-law’s house: she is stuck there with her husband under the thumb of Simeon whom she cannot leave. Her dioramas are visions of the life she cannot have: they represent free, boundless deserts and idyllic gardens in exotic locations – Italy, Arabia, Japan – strikingly opposed to the English countryside. These colourful, Eden-like representations reveal that she does not find freedom or happiness in her supposedly idyllic rural life. These dioramas remain but an unachievable dream made out of plastic: in the end, Lydia cannot physically escape Gorston Hall. The house is described in terms strikingly opposite to Lydia’s dioramas: her dioramas are open and plain whereas the house is closed, oppressive and heavily ornamented. The windows themselves do not serve to open up on the outside world: they are used by Simeon Lee to watch his family’s comings and goings, as a jail guard would observe his prisoners (see 2.2.2. for the detailed analysis of Gorston Hall and its description). The imagery of Gorston Hall, as opposed to Lydia’s dioramas, makes it clear

that the house is not the escapist fantasy that the *Beau Idéal* is supposed to represent – it is, instead, a prison. This feeling of incarceration pervades all of Christie’s closed circles: in *Curtain*, Hastings says that the Cavendish family “felt like prisoners” (Christie 2002a, 7); in *None*, the characters are called “the prisoners” (Christie 2011, 243).

This prison, in fact, is eventually even more unsafe than the outside: “evil forces” reign upon them and their power is unstoppable. In this case, the evil force is first the abuser, of whom the characters (theoretically) cannot get rid; then it becomes the murderer, who grants him- or herself the supreme power of deciding of life and death. The fact that the murderer’s identity remains unknown has a double effect: first it means that he or she is still present among them and has not been cast out, and second it signifies that the murderer is one of them, but they cannot know who. The inside/outside dialectic is then completely reversed. Indeed, “Outside and inside are both intimate – they are always ready to be reversed, to exchange their hostility. If there exists a border-line surface between such an inside and outside, this surface is painful on both sides” (Bachelard 1994, 217-8). The inside then becomes a dangerous world where a monster looms, while the outside becomes synonymous with freedom – freedom from the abuser’s threat and later freedom from the endless questioning about the murderer’s identity. This reversal is made explicit by comparing Lydia Lee’s dioramas to the description of Gorston Hall: the house that is supposed to embody the *Beau Idéal* dream of safety becomes a nightmare. Instead of being the conservative ideal of a just and noble *pater familias*, the bourgeois head of family is a libidinous tyrant who flaunts his money in the most tasteless manner and uses his power to oppress his family. On the other hand, the supposedly dangerous outside becomes the embodiment of freedom for Lydia. Her dearest dream is not only to cross the boundary that keeps her entrapped in her father-in-law’s house, but to live in places that have no boundary whatsoever.

The boundary separating inside from outside thus gains an ambiguous status: while enclosure may protect, it can also harm. This paradox is illustrated in *None*: “They exchanged good-nights on the upper landing. Each of them went into his or her own room, and each of them automatically, almost without conscious thought, locked the door...” (Christie 2011, 79). The characters are split between two different instincts: on the one hand, staying together means that the murderer theoretically cannot harm them, but on the other, locking themselves down (which is the very thing that enabled the murderer to kill them and to deprive them of assistance) puts a physical barrier between the murderer and his victims. Does the boundary represent safety or danger, in this case? This impossible dilemma, directly inherited from Gaston Leroux (see 1.3.), constantly pervades Christie’s closed circles.

The effect created is one of unhomeliness. Homi Bhabha defines the unhomely as “the shock of recognition of the world-in-the home, the home-in-the-world” (Bhabha 1992, 141). Christie’s closed circles are unhomely because the characters find in their own house or in a homely place what is supposed to be a defining trait of the outside world exclusively: criminality, violence, evil. When the relationship between inside and outside is reversed, “the private and the public become part of each other, forcing upon us a vision that is as divided as it is disorienting” (*ibid.*): it becomes difficult to differentiate between what is intimate and safe, and what is public and unsafe, all the more so as the murderer remains an unknown figure hiding behind a familiar face. Each character might either embody order and safety or, on the contrary, disorder and violence. As explained in 1.3.2., the murder cannot be attributed to an intruder: the violation was necessarily committed by an insider, or so the enclosed community thinks. It was an insider who entered the victim’s room, this intimate sanctuary no one is allowed to penetrate; it is an insider who may commit another murder soon.

The transformation of an inside, enclosed space into a prison in which a “force of evil” lives that thrives on transgression and violation is reminding us of another genre: the Gothic, and more precisely the female Gothic. According to Kate Ferguson Ellis in *The Contested Castle*, the female Gothic is a home that “has lost its prelapsarian purity and is in need of rectification” (Ferguson Ellis 1989, ix). The female Gothic similarly relies on an idealised conception of home, a private sphere, an enclosed safe space that inevitably becomes unsafe and haunted (*ibid.*, x), a prison for the heroine (*ibid.*, xii). It is a genre that addresses in a metaphorical way the domestic dangers that women fall victims to. Christie similarly perceives the dangers of idealised, hierarchical “safe” places that enclose and isolate a community. She explores “the darkness, brutality, and evil to be found much ‘closer to home’” (Yiannitsaros 2016, 8) and turns the detective genre into “a literature of incarceration” (*ibid.*, 16); she constantly explores the problems of abuse, exceptionalism, and violence within supposedly well-ordered communities. In doing so, she transforms settings that seem traditional and proper into places of crisis, deviation and rupture and she presents the paradoxical situation of a home that is not a home, either because it is too corrupted to ever be one, or because it is mistakenly assumed to be homely even when it can never be a true home. Christie thus creates settings that are fundamentally unhomely – or, to use Sigmund Freud’s term, uncanny. The uncanny designates something familiar and homely that turns into or reveals itself to be the very opposite. The enclosed setting, then, becomes a psychologically disturbing place, a Gothic place where the monster could be anyone at all.

Conclusion to Chapter Two

This chapter showed that spatial enclosure is a necessary component of the closed circle formula, for it is only by sealing the setting hermetically that Christie can provide a finite number of suspects and solutions. This complete confinement is typically achieved by establishing a physical boundary cutting off the setting from the outside world at the moment of the murder. In order to establish a solid boundary, Christie often accumulates various types of enclosure *and* chooses settings that stand apart and are in rupture from the rest of society. These choices, however, highlight the innate artificiality of the closed circle ploy. To make this artificiality less shocking to the reader, Christie chooses to dramatise the most contrived aspects of her plotting, opting to create a surface level of truth to life rather than aiming for actual realism. Treating her enclosed settings like a stage serves Christie well as far as the game with the reader is concerned: descriptions and maps are used like clues that make the reader actively interact with the story. The enclosed setting thus becomes more than a mere component of the plot, being instead an absolute, self-contained world that the reader can explore and where every detail matters. This finiteness is guaranteed by the complete isolation of the setting from reality: the setting is always geographically secluded, even before the murder. This isolation, which facilitates enclosure, has an ambiguous role: the boundary thus established makes the enclosed characters feel protected from the dangers of the outside, but it also makes them feel entitled to favour their own interests above others'. This entitlement leads to murder, which in turn transforms enclosure and isolation into a threat to the characters' lives and comfort.

In Christie's closed circle mysteries, spatial enclosure is thus the causal factor that ensures social enclosure: it is only by using physical enclosure that Christie can ensure the fairness of the game, i.e. delineate a group of suspects of equal importance; it is also by confining the suspects that Christie creates the conditions that leads to social and psychological unease and murder, highlights the criminal act as a social violation, and emphasises the psychological terror that destroys the group throughout the novel. Because spatial and social enclosure are interrelated, it is now time to study the social aspect of enclosure: the third and final chapter of this *mémoire* will thus analyse the consequences of spatial enclosure on the enclosed group.

Chapter Three: The circle of suspicion³⁶: the inner workings of the enclosed group

After studying the dynamics of spatial enclosure, the characteristics of Christie's settings, and how their enclosure led to crime, and in order to better understand how the tensions in the community lead to crime and suspicion and how the Gothic atmosphere impacts the novels, it is now time to turn to the analysis of the isolated group. The final chapter of this *mémoire* will thus focus on a social and psychoanalytical apprehension of the enclosed space: what are the characteristics of the enclosed group? In what ways does it suffer from its isolation? How does enclosure participate in the climate of suspicion? What are the psychological and social consequences of enclosure and isolation in Christie's novels?

A first part of this chapter will be dedicated to the closed group itself. The purpose of this part will be to determine the composition and dynamic of the group; as such, the interpersonal relationships between the characters will be under examination. This study of the underlying tensions within the group will go hand in hand with an analysis of the uncanny atmosphere that pervades the group throughout the novel. Following this analysis, a second part of this chapter will focus on the issue of guilt being located inside the group: the fact that the murderer is "one of us" has consequences on the characters, turning the enclosed setting into a claustrophobic prison. This part will analyse the manner in which Christie tackles the characters' certainty that the murderer is among them. As this part will demonstrate, the characters all suffer from a repressed desire to kill the victim; the certainty that this desire must have been shared by the others is at the origin of the characters' distrust towards each other. However, this generalised paranoia poses a social issue in Christie's novels. The purpose of the closed circle, we remember, is to make each character look equally guilty; but as a result, the entire closed circle, as well as the society it stands for, appears to be guilty in some way. This third and final part will question the possibility of a return to order when guilt seems universal.

³⁶ Expression borrowed to Annie Combes: "L'espace du crime, chez Agatha Christie, est clos par un cercle de suspicion et non, comme on l'imagine souvent, par des murs et des verrous" (Combes 1989, 86).

3.1. The circle and its tensions

3.1.1. Structures of the closed circle of suspects

In order to understand the dynamics of the group of suspects, it is necessary to study the very structure of the group: how is it organised? What type of characters does it contain? What are the group dynamics like, and how do they affect the mystery? What tensions exist before the murder, and why?

A first (and only) common point between all these different groups is their social class. Christie's characters are most often middle- to upper-class. The working class is barely depicted: one can mention Evelyn in *Styles*, Mr and Mrs Rogers in *None*, Jane Grey in *Clouds*. There is in fact only one novel in which the working class occupies an important place: *Orient Express*, in which six out of the thirteen suspects belong to the working class. This is highly unusual in a Christie novel – so unusual that this mix of social classes is actually a clue for Poirot that the passengers of the train are all part of a conspiracy against the victim. This constitutes, in fact, a sign of the socially prejudiced perspective that is Poirot's, who indeed admits to himself that “The epithet bourgeois was, he admitted, well applied to him. His outlook on life was essentially bourgeois, and always had been” (Christie 2000, 158). Poirot's perception of class echoes the manner in which social classes are depicted throughout the novels. Most working-class characters either do not belong to the closed circle (like Dorcas and the unnamed servants in *Styles*) or – if they were in the enclosed setting at the moment of the murder – are given almost no consideration (like Tressillian in *Christmas*: his role is that of a witness, not that of a suspect). This lack of attention given to the working class is a characteristic of both the Golden Age formula (see Annex B, rule 11) and of the *Beau Idéal* literary tradition, which consider servants and the like as negligible while the focus should be on the “traditional elite members” (Davidoff *et al.* 1995, 50), deemed more interesting and representative of an ideal, enchanting social world. Another reason is that it allows Christie to depict a “leisure class” (Barnard 1980, 26) that never works and is thus always completely available for the detective's investigation; it also enables her to write stories in which money and wills are prominent (Bartell 1997, 183-4). Above all, this class bias is a way for Christie to avoid writing about a social world she knows nothing about. She once declared that “I could never manage miners talking in pubs, because I don't know what

miners talk about in pubs” (quoted in Bargainnier 1980, 30).³⁷ In consequence, the social structure she represents is the one she personally knows, and the working class are usually relegated to the margins of her stories and written according to the conventions of the genre as they appear in Annexes B and C.

Class unity is one of the rare traits that the members of Christie’s closed groups share. Her fictional groups are characterised by the variety of their characters: each one possesses one or two distinctive characteristics. In *Christmas*, for instance, there is the loyal son (Alfred), the son who holds a lifelong grudge against his father (David), the indebted politician (George), the prodigal son (Harry), the foolish wife (Magdalene) and the wife who wants independence (Lydia), the mysterious stranger (Stephen) and the ruthless granddaughter milking her grandfather for money (Pilar). Some of these character types are recurring from one novel to another. The never-do-well son or nephew appears in several novels (*Christmas*, *Ackroyd*, *Hickory*, *A Pocket Full of Rye* are only a few examples) and so do the indebted politician, the empty-headed wife, the wife in dire need of independence, and the suspicious stranger. Other recurring characters include the frighteningly competent secretary, the angry leftist youth, the boring retired military man, the dramatic, hysterical woman... The characters may or may not conform to the stereotype assigned to them: for instance, in *Orient Express*, Mrs Hubbard is the embodiment of the dramatic woman, but it is revealed that it is but a role she plays; the never-do-well Ralph Patton in *Ackroyd* is actually looking for a stable life, etc. The use of stock characters reveals that appearances can be deceiving: the guiltiest-looking person can be an innocent who draws the reader’s sympathy, and conversely. Even though Christie plays with stereotypes to mislead the reader, these character types also make the reader identify the conflicts that pervade the group immediately: for instance in *Christmas* the well-to-do son and the never-do-well son naturally grate on each other’s nerves, and so do the politician and the rebellious son, or the loyal and the resentful son. Christie only needs a few pages to establish that interpersonal conflicts are rife within the group.

Indeed, Christie’s groups are characterised by their being a “relatively tight world” (Bartell 1997, 184) in which everybody knows one another on a *personal* level – meaning that the characters directly interact with one another, even if they are not intimate. In fact, Christie’s groups constitute what is called in sociology a primary group. A primary group is

The simplest, the first, the most universal of all forms of association [...] that in which a small number of persons meet “face to face” for companionship, mutual aid [etc.]. The

³⁷Christie actually has the same approach towards aristocracy: Princess Dragomiroff and Count and Countess Andrenyi in *Orient Express* are almost the only aristocrats in her works, which paradoxically means that the working-class is actually depicted more often.

face-to-face group is the nucleus of all organization [...]. In primary group life our relations with the others are always, to some extent, *personal*. Here we *feel* sympathy or antipathy, we often love or hate. In any event we face our fellows as total human beings and with them we *directly* co-operate and directly conflict. (Maciver and Page 1959, 218-221)

By depicting primary groups, what Christie presents are groups broken down to their bare essentials, reduced to their most critical and fundamental characteristics.³⁸ The focus can thus be on the interpersonal relationships between the characters. That the group exists even before the murder is committed makes the loves and hates that exist between characters significant and become psychological clues. In the case of *Christmas*, for instance, Poirot posits that the apparent hatred between Alfred and Harry Lee might actually hide their complicity in their father's murder; in *Styles*, the fact that Lawrence Cavendish is in love with Cynthia Murdoch enables Poirot to understand that Lawrence lied on a very important information to protect her; in *Orient Express*, the familiarity between Mary Debenham and Colonel Arbuthnot clues Poirot in to the fact that the passengers all know each other.

Primary groups are defined by their “limited size of membership,” “personal contact between members,” “degree of formal recognition” and “type of interest pursued” (*ibid.*, 215). In Christie's stories, the “personal contact between members” is actually ensured by the setting itself – its cramped conditions mean that the characters have no choice but to interact – and by the “limited size of membership.” Indeed, Christie's closed circles are usually small, typically counting between eight and twelve characters with a marked preference for a circle of ten characters (minus the victim): *Five Little Pigs* has five, *Dumb Witness* six, *After the Funeral* seven, *Styles* eight, *The Hollow* and *Clouds* nine, *Christmas*, *Nine*, *Appointment*, *Evil* and *Crooked House* ten, *Tragedy* and *Ackroyd* eleven, *Announced* and *Mesopotamia* twelve, *Nile* and *Orient Express* thirteen. (Although the number may be hard to determine: in *Christmas*, Sugden does not appear as a suspect at first and neither do Shepherd in *Ackroyd* or ten-year-old Josephine in *Crooked House*). Christie's smallest group is in *Cards* – four suspects – and her biggest is in *Hickory* – sixteen suspects, although not all of them are given equal attention, which shows that smaller groups are easier to handle.

The “degree of formal recognition” as well as the “type of interest pursued” show even more variety in Christie's closed circles. While all of Christie's closed circles are recognised

³⁸ This also means that the groups she depicts are actually representations of society itself – or at least of the way she perceives the English society. Maciver and Page call the primary group “the nucleus of all social organization” and “the unit cell of the social structure” (Maciver and Page 1958, 218-9), meaning that these groups are microcosms standing for society at large. In this light, stock characters appear not as *literary* stereotypes, but as real-life archetypes. The efficient secretary, the old military bore, etc., are easily identifiable characters for the reader who thus gets a feeling of familiarity and universality from these characters.

as units of their own, united mostly because they are enclosed together, they all constitute vastly different types of units: there are households, travellers on the same means of transportation, people gathered at a party... As a consequence, the groups' interests – i.e. the reason why these people are gathered in the first place – vary too. Indeed, “[s]ome groups [...] are inclusive territorial units having no specialized interests; others [...] are organized in order to fulfil specific interests of their members” (*ibid.*, 214): for instance, families live together without trying to achieve any specific aim, while the travellers of the *Orient Express a priori* aim to go home and are gathered together by circumstance only. In spite of this apparent chaos, all these different types of group can be classified into three main categories that I will analyse below.

The first type of group is the family, who either live together or are gathered for a special occasion. This family constitutes the victim's restricted circle of relatives, which means that their being gathered and enclosed together when the murder is committed is plausible. This is the most recurrent out of Christie's closed circles, and the most classical: it appears in *Styles*, *Christmas*, *Ackroyd*, *Crooked House*, *Towards Zero*, *Ordeal by Innocence*, *Dumb Witness*, *Five Little Pigs*, *The Hollow*, *After the Funeral*, *They Do It with Mirrors*, *A Pocket Full of Rye*, *4:50 from Paddington*, and a number of short stories such as “Dead Man's Mirror.” In all these stories, the suspects are the victims' families, and occasionally very close family friends. Christie's families, however, present several striking characteristics. First of all, Christie never depicts traditional nuclear families, i.e. the parents and children only – except in *Ordeal*, in which the children are all adopted. Instead, Christie represents blended families, i.e. families with step-parents or step-children: in *Styles* for instance Emily Inglethorp is the step-mother of Lawrence and John Cavendish and Alfred is her second husband. Christie also depicts extended families, i.e. families that include grandchildren, sons- and daughters-in-law, and occasionally aunts, uncles and cousins. This is the case in *Christmas*, but also in numerous other novels: in *Dumb Witness* the suspects are the victim's nephews and nieces, in *Crooked House* three generations live under the same roof, and *The Hollow* and *Towards Zero* are concerned with cousins, wards, current wives, ex-wives and even mistresses. Christie likes to portray complicated families: in *They Do It with Mirrors*, the suspects are Carrie-Louise Serrocold's new husband and the children, grand-children and step-children she gained through various marriages. These complicated family trees result not only in more characters, but also in more conflict, notably around the victim's will: in almost all of these novels the question of inheritance is essential and provokes conflict between the members of the family. In *Christmas* for instance, Simeon Lee threatens to cut some characters' allowance

or to cut them out of his will, which begs the question: which character needed money so direly that he or she killed Simeon before he could go through with these changes? The characters' conflicts are most notably revealed through a very telling dispute over Simeon's will:

There was a moment's pause while everyone drew breath and in another moment the battle was in full swing.

Harry said:

'You've always been a damned skinflint, George.'

George retorted:

'At any rate, I've not been a sponge and a rotter!'

'You've been just as much of a sponge as I have! You've batted on Father all these years.'

'You seem to forget that I hold a responsible and arduous position which –'

Harry said:

'Responsible and arduous my foot! You're only an inflated gasbag!'

Magdalene screamed: 'How dare you?'

[...] David said with sudden violence:

'Must we have all this disgraceful fuss over *money*!' (Christie 2001a, 272-3)

This conversation is the tangible proof of what has been repeated throughout the novel, i.e. that the household has always been "well-ordered" but never "happy" or "harmonious" (*ibid.*, 182): the family members hold little to no respect for each other and the family's interactions are tainted with resentment, jealousy, hatred, and suspicion. The description of this interaction as a "battle" makes the group look not like a family but like enemies. The Lee family is rather representative of Christie's fictional families as a whole, meaning that families in her works are deeply dysfunctional. Their kinship, instead of making them closer, actively works against them as a poison: "It is here a *family* affair. It is a poison that works in the blood – it is intimate – it is deep-seated. There is here, I think, *hate* and *knowledge*..." (*ibid.*, 211). The characters' knowledge of each other participates to a never-ending hatred that only worsens their relationships.

That the suspects are typically the victim's family and that conflict revolves around the victim's will highlight that the victim occupies the central position of these circles – true to Poirot's adage that "The character of the victim has always something to do with his or her murder" (Christie 2001a, 152). Most often the head of family, he or she is usually a tyrant who controls their dependents' lives. Because of the familial hierarchy that places this character on top, all the characters' lives revolve around this one character. At best, the tyrant is an authoritative personality who is nevertheless generous, like Emily Inglethorp in *Styles*: she is described early on as "an energetic, autocratic personality" to the point that that her first husband has always been "under his wife's ascendancy" (Christie 2007, 10). While she is

“most generous” (*ibid.*, 10, 11: the fact bears repeating as if the narrator tried to convince himself...), this is but a role she assumes: it is mentioned that she has a liking for “playing the Lady Bountiful” (*ibid.*, 10), the verb “to play” revealing that this is but a role, a mask she puts on. In truth, she “was a lady who liked to make her own plans, and expected other people to fall in with them, and in this case she certainly had the whip hand, namely: the purse strings” (*ibid.*, 11). The slave driver imagery as well as the string imagery (which irresistibly reminds one of a puppeteer pulling the characters’ strings) is used again in *Christmas* to describe Simeon Lee:

‘Your father is – inclined to be – tyrannical–’

‘He’s old.’

‘And will grow older. And consequently more tyrannical. Where will it end? Already he dictates our lives to us completely. We can’t make a plan of our own! If we do, it is always liable to be upset. [...] You are his slave, Alfred. If we have planned to go away and Father suddenly wishes us not to go, you cancel your arrangements and remain without a murmur! If the whim takes him to send us away, we go... We have no lives of our own – no independence.’ (Christie 2001a, 22-3)

In Christie’s stories, the head of family is thus almost always a dictatorial monster that manipulates his or her family and deprives them of their freedom. This freedom can be a freedom of movement and opinion, as with Simeon Lee; or, as with Emily Inglethorp, it can be financial independence, in which case the strings the master manipulator pulls are those of the purse. In short, in these groups, *everybody* is discontented and has a reason to want the victim dead – to get revenge, to be free, or to have more money. This structure debunks the ideal of family unity by bringing up the question of interest.

The second type of group that is to be found in Christie’s closed circle mysteries is what Alison Light calls a “society of strangers” (Light 2001, 61-2). This is a group of people who do not know each other and only spent minimal time with each other before the murder was committed. They are “heterogeneous societies that are the product (more or less) of chance and are far from being communities” (York 2007, 117). They are most often travellers – as in *Orient Express*, *Nile*, and *Clouds* – and occasionally on a vacation together at the same hotel – as in *Evil* or most notably in *None*, in which each character was led to the island under the pretence of spending a vacation or having a job there. Even more rarely, they are gathered at the same party because they happen to know the host, as is the case in *Cards* and *Tragedy*. These groups are remarkable for their various, sometimes clashing, backgrounds, and the fact that they nevertheless have to cohabit with one another:

‘[...] All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep

and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never perhaps to see each other again.’ (Christie 2001c, 38)

Several factors make these communities unique. First of all, they are temporary groups, meant to exist only for a very short amount of time (a few hours, or a few days); secondly, they have absolutely nothing in common (they are “heterogeneous” indeed), meaning that their sense of community is rather loose as it based on the simple fact that they find themselves grouped and enclosed together; and thirdly, all the characters are (technically) strangers to one another, with the exception of a few people who already know each other (in *None*, the Rogers are married, for instance). This peculiar situation creates ambiguous feelings: while the characters are polite to one another, there is no actual friendship. In *None*, for instance, “There was as yet no fraternizing among the party. It was as though each member of it was puzzled by the other members” (Christie 2011, 26): although everyone is polite, there is no sense of community and the characters are separated by social “barriers” (Christie 2001c, 56). The murder can sometimes create a sense of unity, as in *Orient Express*, in which “all were united by a common misfortune” (*ibid.*), or they can further divide the characters, as in *None*: “we are all strangers to one another and [...], in those circumstances, nobody can be exonerated without the fullest proof” (Christie 2011, 154). These three factors also mean that the relationships formed within this group are to say the least fleeting and superficial – mirroring the avowed artificiality of the group’s meeting in the same place. The role of the detective, then, is to discover who *did* have a relationship with the victim. The victim, once again, is usually at the centre of the circle even in the absence of hierarchy: it is a character one cannot but notice, usually for sinister reasons. In *Orient Express*, Ratchett is remarkable for the “strange malevolence, [the] unnatural tensivity in the glance” (*ibid.*, 28) that makes him look “evil” and like “a wild animal” (*ibid.*, 29). Linnet Ridgeway in *Nile* and Shaitana in *Cards* are similarly remarkable: the former because she is domineering, the second because he is a Mephistopheles figure who enjoys mentally torturing his guests.

The third and final type of group³⁹ situates itself in-between the family and the society of strangers. Simply put, it is a group of people who spend great amounts of time together (usually because they live together) and who know each other well, but not as intimately as

³⁹ One novel remains impossible to classify. *Appointment* presents a hybrid group, composed of the Boynton family, people who know the Boynton family while not being intimate with them, and complete strangers. The novel focuses on the family’s dynamics (Mrs Boynton is one of Christie’s most monstrous victims, second only to Ratchett) but a stranger is the murderer. This novel paradoxically belongs to all three categories at the same time – a reflection, perhaps, of the fact that Mrs Boynton was so monstrous that she was wanted dead universally, by family and strangers alike.

one would know one's family. This category comprises groups that share living accommodations (a guesthouse in *Curtain*, a boarding school in *Hickory*) and groups of friends (*Sparkling Cyanide*), neighbours (*Announced*) and colleagues (*Mesopotamia*). These groups do not have a hierarchy as families do, but they are no strangers to one another; they "are not a collection of strangers who have arrived here independently" (Christie 2002a, 60): they are a composite group of wildly different people ("all sorts and nationalities," Christie 2001b, 26) who have a history, "its cliques and rivalries and jealousies" (*ibid.*, 27). It is this history that the detective must pay attention to: he or she must unravel the intricate network of love stories, friendships and rivalries that do not exist in a family or a group of strangers:

[...] Here we have [...] people herded together, of varying temperaments, of different sexes. A loves B, but B loves C, and D and E are at daggers drawn because of A perhaps. It is all that that I need to know. The interplay of human emotions. The quarrels, the jealousies, the friendships, the malice and all uncharitableness." (Christie 1956, 23-4)

These perpetual "quarrels," "jealousies" and "malice" is particularly depicted in *Mesopotamia*, in which the group is riddled with discord and various rivalries, for instance between Mrs Mercado and Louise Leidner:

I understood then that Mrs Leidner was the sort of woman who could easily make enemies. There was a cool rudeness in her tone (not that I blamed her for it) which brought a flush to Mrs Mercado's rather sallow cheeks. She stammered out something, but Mrs Leidner had risen and had joined her husband at the other end of the roof. (Christie 2001b, 58)

This bad blood is usually attributed to Louise Leidner, once again true to the adage that the victim is usually at the centre of the circle and is "the clue to the mystery" (*ibid.*, 192). The group is described to have been "the happiest, jolliest lot imaginable" (*ibid.*, 194) but, with Louise's arrival, the group is now "jumpy" and they "glare at each other like enemies" (*ibid.*): we find, once again, a tense group that is divided and characterised by enmity rather than united.

"The interplay of human emotions," indeed, is Christie's focus in her closed circle mysteries. She is interested in "the preliminaries of crime," i.e. "the deep smouldering resentments and dissatisfactions that do not always come to the surface but which may suddenly explode into violence" (Christie 2012, xix-xx). For this reason, most of Christie's closed circles are usually acquainted before the crime is committed, if only superficially (unless the motivation for their being gathered together is part of the criminal plot, as in *None*): they form a small, isolated group in which conflicts emerge that the detective must

unravel. As she writes in *Towards Zero*, while the murder is the start of the novel, the story of the murder itself begins long before it is committed:

'Human beings. All kinds and sorts and sizes and shapes of 'em. Some with brains and a good many more without. [...] I like a good detective story [...] [b]ut, you know, they begin in the wrong place! They begin with the murder. But the murder is the end. The story begins long before that – years before, sometimes – with all the causes and events that bring certain people to a certain place at a certain time on a certain day. [...] All converging towards a given spot... And then, when the time comes – over the top! Zero Hour. Yes, all of them converging towards zero...' (Christie 1991, 3-4)

Christie echoes Todorov's opinion in "Typology of Detective Fiction" that the detective story comprises two stories: the story of the murder, i.e. what happened at the fatal hour but also all the events that preceded the murder and led to it, and the story of the investigation, which relates the detective's efforts to retrace the story of the murder. The Zero Hour is the moment when the two stories meet, the breaking point when the tensions accumulated within the group culminate into a murder that must be investigated.⁴⁰ In the closed circle mystery, the story of the murder is the story of the group itself, of the tensions and rivalries that divide it, that pit the characters against the victim but also against each other. The enclosed setting, in short, is a point of convergence ("Different people, with different aims, and representing different interests – all converge [here]," Christie 2014, 221) where common entrapment leads to ever-growing tension until a murderer emerges in the group's midst. From the point of view of generic evolution, this is where Christie differentiates herself from her predecessors Poe and Doyle (and, to some extent, Leroux): their respective sleuths, Dupin and Holmes, were "armchair detectives": the novel or short story started in their respective apartment where their clients explain either the case or their suspicions. The focus, in this classical conception of the genre, was thus on the story of the investigation and the detective's solving of the case (see 1.2.1.). Christie's choice, on the other hand, testifies to her integration within the general history of the genre and of the distance she took from her models. Christie's novels never open with the murder itself; instead, the first few chapters are dedicated to showing the interpersonal relationships of the characters within the closed circle. In *Christmas*, for instance, the first hundred pages describe the days that precede the murder of Simeon Lee. This first part of the novel emphasises the mental torment Simeon inflicts on his children, while the numerous references to Simeon's wealth, to his children's resentment, and to their lack of independence immediately allow the reader to assign potential motives to all the characters. Similarly, in *Mesopotamia*, the narrator Amy Leatheran spends the first few

⁴⁰ Interestingly enough, a recent translation of the novel in French has changed the expression "Zero Hour" (and thus the title) into *Le point de rupture* which translates into "the breaking point."

chapters giving a detailed account of the house's design, of the rivalries within the group, of Louise Leidner's personality and paranoia, as well as of the atmosphere of tension that pervades the group. All these elements, given early on in the narrative, make the reader suspicious from the very start but they also point to a very *social* approach of the genre on Christie's part: what matters most, in those mysteries, are the group's conflicts.

What appears, then, is that the enclosed group – be it a family group, a group of strangers, or a group of friends, colleagues and housemates – is always a fractured one, a unit that is no longer united. Maciver and Page posit that in a primary group, “[t]he members of all groups, of course, are in some degree conscious of their collective interests”; there is a “participant co-operative spirit” that underlies the group's interpersonal relationships, for “the central interest of the group as such must be dominant in their minds. The common interest must be strong enough to control the inevitable self-assertive impulses which are exhibited in all face-to-face association” (Maciver and Page, 214, 224). Instead, what Christie depicts in her closed circle mysteries are groups that have stopped working together long before the murder. In each and every case, the idyllic English ideal of social order is broken because it is plagued by the evils of individualism. This is the story, in short, of groups in which each character seems to impede the others' interests. Families are manipulated by a despotic figure; as a result, they wish to escape the group and are actively working against one another in their quest for money and independence. Groups of friends, colleagues, and housemates only share a superficial entente and are divided by their rivalries and jealousies; by the time the murder is committed, their alienation is such that “You'd have said it was a party of strangers – not people who had known each other – some of them – for quite a number of years” (Christie 2001b, 50). Finally, temporary societies of strangers have no relationship, their sense of community is shallow, and those who do have a relationship keep it concealed because there is something shameful about it. The initial isolation of all these groups participates in creating tensions that go more and more inescapable (see 2.3.); the group's eventual enclosure/entrapment, simultaneous with the murder, only creates more strain. The murder is the climax of an ever-growing cleavage, the final act that breaks the group apart and reveals a state of deep disorder stemming from *within*. Not only does it mean that one member is actively working against the group's best interests – by killing another member and trying to pin the blame on everyone else or on a specific character – but it also creates suspicion. When the setting encloses the characters, the group becomes a circle of suspects, a unit that is isolated and forced together by circumstances but that is actually so divided that it does not work as a community should: “Tant que le coupable n'est pas désigné l'ensemble des

personnages fonctionne comme une entité indissociable et ce sont les limites de l'espace où le crime a été commis qui le constitue comme tel en l'enserrant dans sa clôture" (Mijolla-Mellor 2006, 154). In the end, it is thus spatial enclosure that defines the group as a single, closed unit; but while it delineates them as a group, it makes them a group of enemies.

It is this fracture in the group dynamic that the third part of this *mémoire* aims to study: where does the tension, palpable before the murder, stem from? How does the Zero Hour, the murder itself, change this tension? What are the consequences of enclosure in such a context? How do these tensions fuel the characters' and the readers' suspicion? What does this fracture reveal about society itself – since the groups represented are supposed to stand as microcosms for the British civilization itself?

3.1.2. The uncanny atmosphere: “there is a devil amongst us”⁴¹

It would be wrong to assume that this fracture in the group goes unnoticed until the Zero Hour. In fact, the characters are very much aware not only of their dissensions and lack of unity, but also of the fact that there is something boiling under the surface. In Christie's closed circle stories, this tension is systemically revealed through a tense, unnatural atmosphere that reveals unease even before the murder is committed.

The word Christie likes to use to describe this atmosphere is “queer,” meaning that there is something strange, unusual, and abnormal about the atmosphere. Interestingly, this peculiar atmosphere is to be found in all three types of group that Christie depicts. In *None*, the oddity comes from the members of the group of strangers, from their unnatural association, and from the mysterious circumstances of their gathering: “Everything – somehow – was a little queer. The absence of the Owens, the pale ghostlike Mrs Rogers. And the guests! Yes, the guests were queer, too. An oddly assorted party” (Christie 2011, 33). The family in *Christmas* is similarly affected: “And the others were talking too, but only, as it were, in spasms. There was something a little – queer about them” (Christie 2001a, 93). This atmosphere inspires misery, to the point that the valet, Tressillian, “had a feeling of depression. Christmas Eve, and all this strain and tension . . . He didn't like it!” (*ibid.*, 95). There is a clash between the atmosphere one is expecting – the joy of a Christmas family reunion – and the tension felt by all the members of the family. This clashing mood is similarly observed in *Mesopotamia* (in which the word “queer” recurs forty-seven times) among the group of colleagues:

⁴¹ “There is, as I have said, a devil amongst us” (Christie 2011, 151).

‘[...] Yes, individually they are all pleasant people. But somehow or other, I may have been fanciful, but the last time I went to see them I got a queer impression of something being wrong. I don’t know what it was exactly... Nobody seemed quite natural. There was a queer atmosphere of tension. I can explain best what I mean by saying that they all passed the butter to each other too politely.’ (Christie 2001b, 27)

Whatever conflicts exist between the characters are carefully hidden and disguised under a varnish of politeness that cannot quite pass as natural. However, the characters are at a loss to point out where exactly the feeling of awkwardness comes from. Only one thing can be ascertained: the unease does not come from the individuals themselves, but from the group as a whole and it pervades the entire setting (“And I felt all along that there was something wrong. In the atmosphere – in the house,” Christie 2002g, 16). This atmosphere is an early clue, “signs and indications” of a deeper-running problem (Christie 2001b, 79). This atmosphere recurs in all of Christie’s closed circles⁴², regardless of the type of group that is portrayed, meaning that whatever pervades these groups, the problem is always one and the same... and the outcome is always murder.

But what can this problem be? The answer is, quite simply, evil. The strange atmosphere is associated several times to evil: ‘No! Evil is not only in one’s mind. Evil exists! You seem to have no consciousness of the evil in the world. I have. I can feel it. I’ve always felt it – here in this house–’” Lydia Lee asserts quite forcefully (Christie 2001a, 26). As it will turn out, she is right. Evil is recognized as such even by Poirot: “Evil does walk the earth and can be recognized as such” he declares in *Evil* (Christie 2001e, 21).

At first, this evil palpable in Christie’s closed circles seems to come from one character, usually the victim/abuser. In *Christmas*, this character is Simeon Lee. The manipulation and mental torture inflicted on his family cause them to behave strangely:

Mr Alfred, for instance, he looked downright ill. As though he had had a shock or something. Quite dazed he looked and just turning over the food on his plate without eating it. [...] Kept looking down the table towards him – not noticeably, of course, just quietly. Mr George was very red in the face – gobbling his food, he was, without tasting it. He’d get a stroke one day if he wasn’t careful. Mrs George wasn’t eating. Slimming, as likely as not. [...] Mr David? Tressilian felt worried about Mr David. Just like his mother, he was, to look at. And remarkably young-looking still. But nervy; there, he’d knocked over his glass.

⁴² Except in *Orient Express*, in which nothing seems out of the ordinary until Ratchett is found dead. This normality – most abnormal in a Christie closed circle – is a clue that every character is in on the conspiracy and is actively trying to look normal. This striving for normalcy should result in some queer feeling of an artificial situation too – but as it is, this excessive, artificial normalcy is hidden behind other uncanny elements that occur in the course of the novel: the victim’s scream of agony piercing into the night, the ubiquitous presence of a murderer who seems to be both male and female, the fortuitous immobilization of the train, Mrs Hubbard’s assertion that someone has penetrated into her berth at night, and the case itself, described as “fantastically impossible” (*ibid.*, 339). In this novel, everything relating to the case appears so artificial or so extraordinary that the sheer artificiality of the grouping goes unnoticed.

[...] Mr David hardly seemed to notice what he had done, just sat staring in front of him with a white face.” (Christie 2001a, 93)

The Lee family is described as though they were haunted: they are “dazed,” they have “a white face,” they are too quiet and all seem as though they have received a mental shock. They look ill, and do not deign touch their food which, during a festive family dinner, strikes one as odd and reveals their disharmony. It is no wonder that a character later on refers to Simeon’s house as being a “mausoleum” (*ibid.*, 60): the group is haunted by a Gothic-like monster, Simeon, that the character see as “a bogey,” “an inhuman monster” (*ibid.*, 39).

The evil pervading the group undoubtedly comes from the victim whose presence creates tension, and from the conflicts that divide the characters. However, it also has another source: the murderer him- or herself. This is most strikingly acknowledged in *Mesopotamia*:

[...] In my opinion, the state of mind of a community is always directly due to the influence of the man at the top. Dr Leidner, quiet though he was, was a man of great personality. It was due to his tact, to his judgment, to his sympathetic manipulation of human beings that the atmosphere had always been such a happy one.

‘If there was a change, therefore, the change must be due to the man at the top – in other words, to Dr Leidner. It was Dr Leidner, not Mrs Leidner [the victim], who was responsible for the tension and uneasiness. No wonder the staff felt the change without understanding it. The kindly, genial Dr Leidner, outwardly the same, was only playing the part of himself. The real man was an obsessed fanatic plotting to kill.’ (Christie 2001c, 344-5)

The murderer is responsible for a change in atmosphere: the other characters are perceptive enough to feel his or her dark plans in motion. More importantly, this excerpt highlights two essential characteristics of Christie’s closed circles: the reversal of a homely setting into an unhomely one (a reversal that reveals the fake quality of the quiet that seems to characterise these settings), provoked by the presence of a double-faced figure among the group.

The effect produced is uncanny, as it was defined by Sigmund Freud in his 1919 essay “The Uncanny.” The Uncanny, according to Freud, is a subject pertaining to aesthetics; it is a feeling of dread that is indefinable, so much so that most languages do not have a word for it and translate it into extremely different words. (The English language suggests “haunted” as a possible translation, while other languages propose “demonic” and “sinister,” translations that all echo Christie’s writing of the closed circle. The most striking translation is the Latin one, *locus suspectus*, the “suspect place” ...) Freud traces the origins and evolution of the German word, *unheimlich* (“unhomely”) and its positive form *heimlich* (“homely”), to notice that the word *heimlich* that initially designated something homely, safe, intimate, eventually came to mean its exact opposite: something that is hidden, concealed. (One can see there the very problem mentioned in 2.3.2. of this *mémoire*: the isolation of the private sphere leads to an

excess of privacy, where shameful secrets are kept away from the public eye and thus never punished.) This leads Freud to posit that “everything is *unheimlich* that ought to have remained secret and hidden but has come to light” (Freud 1955, 225). The Uncanny is thus not simply something that is unfamiliar, but something (or someone) familiar that turns into something unfamiliar – or, conversely, something unfamiliar that suddenly adopts a familiar appearance, as with the effect of *déjà vu*. The concept of the Uncanny has nevertheless more nuance than this simple definition: the Uncanny is characterized by the coming to light of something repressed, a secret that should have remained concealed: “this uncanny is in reality nothing new or alien, but something which is familiar and old-established in the mind and which has become alienated from it only through the process of repression” (*ibid.*, 241). This something that should have been repressed consists of “residues of animistic [i.e. found in primitive societies] mental activity” (*ibid.*).

The excerpt above, which illustrates exactly what is going on Christie’s closed circles, is a proof that those closed circles are stories revolving around the Uncanny. In each case, the homely setting turns unhomely, first because it is the domain of a monster that preys on the characters and feeds off their distress (Simeon Lee, Emily Inglethorp, Aristide Leonides, Carol Boynton, Shaitana whose name literally means “devil” in Arabic...), and then because of the murder. The perfect utopia that these settings are supposed to embody (a fact made even more striking because they are *Beau Idéal* homes or heterotopias, special places meant to conform to an ideal of safety and glamour) turns into a dystopia, either because of systemic flaws that no one bothers to rectify (the isolation that allows for abuse to go unchecked) and/or because of an individual who decides to further divide the already fragile group.

Christie sometimes foreshadows the Uncanny early on in her stories by way of her settings. The most remarkable example is the house in *None*:

She had pictured it differently, close to shore, crowned with a beautiful white house. But there was no house visible, only the boldly silhouetted rock with its faint resemblance to a giant head. There was something sinister about it. She shivered faintly. (Christie 2011, 24)

The boat churned its way round the rock. Now at last the house came into view. The south side of the island was quite different. It shelved gently down to the sea. The house was there facing south – low and square and modern-looking with rounded windows letting in all the light. (*ibid.*, 29)

If this had been an old house, with creaking wood, and dark shadows, and heavily panelled walls, there might have been an eerie feeling. But this house was the essence of modernity. There were no dark corners – no possible sliding panels – it was flooded with electric light – everything was new and bright and shining. (*ibid.*, 79)

The house on Soldier Island embodies the theme of duality that is characteristic of the Uncanny. There is a complete difference between the external appearance of the island and the house it contains. From the first, the island looks frightening, “sinister” and it elicits shivers. It even presents an uncanny feature: it looks like a head, meaning that in an unhomely place (a rock lost in the sea, far from the coast) one can recognise familiar, unexpected elements such as a head. In spite of this terrifying first sight, the house that appears next is welcoming: it is modern, well-lit, and it looks “gentle” instead of abrupt. In fact, it almost looks *too* good (which, as Freud observes, is a characteristic of the Uncanny too). The contrast between the two sides of the island is jarring: the cohabitation between a frightening island and a heavenly house is as odd as it is revealing of a problem. This indeterminate nature, in-between homely and unhomely, is typically uncanny. In addition to that, even the appearance of the house is misleading. Murder clashes terribly in such an immaculate house (once again, perhaps *too* immaculate to be true). Murder would have fit in a labyrinthine house full of secret passages, as Vera, the narrator, observes in the third except; but because murder is located in a well-to-do place, it is shocking and jarring, which the very reason why such a setting is chosen in the first place:

[...] it should be the Great Good Place; for the more Eden-like it is, the greater the contradiction of murder. [...] The corpse must shock not only because it is a corpse but also because, even for a corpse, it is shockingly out of place, as when a dog makes a mess on a drawing room carpet. (Auden 1974, 402)

For this reason, Christie always chooses settings in which murder and violence would *a priori* would create a shock. Murder, indeed, is

[s]uch an ugly violent word – coming in from the outside world like an ill-mannered storm wind. Murder – a word associated [...] only with delinquent boys with flick knives, or evil-minded doctors poisoning their wives. But murder here – [...]. Incredible. (Christie 2014, 180)

Murder is out of place in the ideal of social harmony supposedly embodied by the setting: murder is supposed to belong in the outside sphere, not in the protective inside sphere. The tense atmosphere is denied as best as the characters can, hidden beneath an appearance of harmony. In fact, this excessive harmony itself adds to the uneasy feeling that pervades these places. Murder is the final moment when the setting is undeniably revealed for what it truly is: an enclosed space that fails to be homely. This is best exemplified in *Orient Express*, in which Poirot wakes up at the exact moment when Ratchett is murdered. He observes that the train is silent and “he missed the motion of the train. If it was a station outside, it was curiously quiet. By contrast the noises on the train seemed unusually loud” (Christie 2001c, 53). The atmosphere is eerie and disquieting because the roles of the poles inside/outside are

reversed: the train, a symbol of movement, has stopped moving, i.e. it has stopped fulfilling its function, while the inside that is supposed to be quiet and peaceful is noisy, metaphorically representing agitation and disorder. The roles of the two spheres are reversed: the inside stops fulfilling its protective function. In fact, that the absence of movement is what betrays that there is something wrong also reveals that the train has failed in trying to be a home away from home: a home is supposed to be stable, steady, unmoving. In Christie's novels, there are thus homes that fail in their homely function, and heterotopias that never manage to be a home. These two settings are revealed to be different from the representation of a perfect shelter they try to fulfil.

The easy reversibility of homeliness and unhomeliness is best depicted in *Styles*. In this novel, Hastings assigns the tense atmosphere pervading the Cavendish-Inglethorp household to two different characters. The first one is Alfred Inglethorp, in whose presence "a sense of constraint and veiled hostility seemed to settle down upon the company" (Christie 2007, 17). Inglethorp is an unpleasant fellow, considered with suspicion because he is a newcomer in the family and a *parvenu*. Later on, Hastings associates unhomeliness with the departure of Evelyn Howard: "something indefinable had gone from the atmosphere. Her presence had spelt security. Now that security was removed – and the air seemed rife with suspicion" (*ibid.*, 27). The irony of the story is that Alfred and Evelyn are working together – they are cousins, lovers, and partners in crime. The character whose presence inspires unhomeliness (mainly because Evelyn pretends to hate him) and the one whose presence inspires homeliness work hand in hand, meaning that homeliness and unhomeliness are two sides of the same coin, easily reversible, easily confused, always pitted against each other but nevertheless complementary and inseparable.

It is this contradiction that Christie aims for in her closed circle mysteries and that creates the Uncanny. The house in *None* could stand as a symbol of the themes of her closed circles: in her mysteries, appearances are deceitful. Characters and settings are characterised by their doubled-faced quality. The dynamics of a group do not correspond to the conventional ideal associated with the setting the group inhabits. Appearances of civilisation, harmony and decency are but a guise: appearances and reality do not match. As in a Gothic tale, Christie plays "across the boundaries (internal/external, self/other), alien yet oddly familiar" which creates "spaces of doubling and fracture" (Collins and Jervis 2008, 4). What ensues is "an experience of disorientation, where the world in which we live suddenly seems strange, alienating or threatening," (*ibid.*, 1).

The epitome of this literature of “doubling and fracture” marked by deceit and double-facedness is the culprit him- or herself. As mentioned above, the presence of the murderer within the group is what creates an uncanny feeling and finalises the social fracture of the group. But who can that murderer be? The answer is terrible: the characters have no idea. The very aim of the closed circle – that everyone can look equally guilty, thus creating suspense and mystery for the reader – is a torture for the characters who live in complete uncertainty: it is “both unsettling, even potentially terrifying, yet also intriguing, fascinating” (*ibid.*, 4). For the reader, it is indeed a reason to read the novel and find entertainment in mystery and ambiguity, but for the characters, it is a source of anxiety and terror:

The uncanny involves feelings of uncertainty, in particular regarding the reality of who one is and what is being experienced. [...] The uncanny is a crisis of the proper: it entails a critical disturbance of what is proper [...] It is a crisis of the natural, touching upon everything that one might have thought was ‘part of nature’: one’s own nature, human nature, the nature of reality and the world. (Royle 2003,1)

This uncertainty and this uncanny atmosphere are caused by one character, the murderer. It is a character that wears a mask, whose appearance does not match its true self. It is, in other words, a character that is double. Just like the murder reveals the double quality of the situation that existed from the start (the pretence of normalcy *versus* the reality of evil, thus making the murder the logical outcome of the initial tension), the murderer has two personalities: its public persona, and its true self. It plays a role for the duration of the story, and even before that – it is interesting to notice that each and every of Christie’s murderers assumes an alias or a disguise at some point in the stories: the murderers impersonate an outsider in *Orient Express*, Wargrave invites the guests on the island under various false identities... Just as the settings are familiar, homely places that sudden reveal their unhomeliness, the murderer is someone who is known, familiar, and most likely trusted by the other characters; yet, the characters know nothing of his or her true self. The murderer is a paradox: it a known person whose true self remains unknown; a mysterious entity that is faceless yet possesses the face of someone the characters know (but *which* face?); a virtual entity whose identity is unknown but who can only be one of a small group of characters. How are the characters to distinguish between reality and illusion in such circumstances? This impossibility creates, as Royle mentions, a crisis in which everything that used to be held for certain and reliable must be doubted. “I’m frightened of things that aren’t the real thing. You don’t know, you see, what’s behind them. It’s like—oh, it’s like a *mask*,” a character declares in *The Hollow* (Christie 2002d, 346). Indeed, in Christie’s body of work, duplicity is most often referred to by using the metaphor of the mask. In the novel *Dumb Witness*, Hastings

identifies Poirot's role as consisting of lifting the murderer's mask: at the end of the novel, the detective shall "strip the mask from one face and show it for what it was – *the face of a killer!*" (Christie 2002b, 378). The vocabulary used to describe the murderer is theatrical, underlining that the murderer is nothing if a consummate actor: in *Mesopotamia*, Poirot describes the murderer, Dr Leidner, as "only playing the part of himself" and split between an "outward" façade and "the real man" (Christie 2001b, 345). In other words, the murderer is an imposter, a dual figure that possesses two faces and that hides behind a persona (it is interesting to notice that *persona* is the Latin word used to designate theatrical masks).

The presence of this double-faced character that looks similar to the group but is actually Other creates instability and terror. The group thus becomes unhomely and uncanny, because it comprises an individual that is both alien and insider, and there is no escaping this character in the small enclosed setting. This, as Hogle explains, is the sign of a true Gothic tale:

[...] a Gothic tale usually takes place (at least some of the time) in an antiquated or seemingly antiquated space – be it a castle, a foreign palace, [...] a primeval frontier or island, a large old house or theatre, [...] [a] public building [etc.]. Within this space [...] are hidden some secrets from the past (sometimes the recent past) that haunt the characters, psychologically, physically, or otherwise at the main time of the story. These hauntings can take many forms, but they frequently assume the features of ghosts, specters, or monsters [...] that rise from within the antiquated space, [...] to manifest unresolved crimes or conflicts that can no longer be successfully buried from view. (Hogle 2002, 2)

Christie's closed circles create a sense of terror (at least among the characters) precisely for these reasons: the settings are enclosed, meaning that the monster in them is inescapable; there are secrets that haunt the characters until they are unveiled; and the murderer arises from *within*, both as creator of tension and as symptom of the issues that pervade the group. One can observe here the legacy of Edgar Allan Poe: as in Poe's tales, enclosed spaces become metaphorically haunted places of danger and terror (see 1.1.2. – although, as mentioned in 3.1.1., Christie added a social dimension to this pattern).

These notions of murder *arising from within* and *being a symptom of other issues* (such as the duplicity pervading the group from the start) are also reminiscent of another important property of the Uncanny that was mentioned above: that of repression. The Uncanny, Freud argues, occurs when something that was familiar but was repressed resurfaces when it should remain hidden. What does the circle repress, then? The answer is given in an excerpt from *Mesopotamia* above, when Poirot mentions that beneath the mask of a jovial, loving man Dr Leidner is really "an obsessed fanatic plotting to kill" (Christie 2001c, 345). The true identities of Christie's murderers, hidden beneath a civilised mask, are primitive, animalistic, as she comments in *Appointment*:

There are such strange things buried down in the unconscious. A lust for power – a lust for cruelty – a savage desire to tear and rend – all the inheritance of our past racial memories... They are all there, [...] all the cruelty and savagery and lust... We shut the door on them and deny them conscious life, but sometimes they are too strong. (Christie 1992, 54)

What is hidden under the mask is the savagery repressed into the unconscious – a savagery that takes on many shapes and pursues different aims, meaning that evil is motivated and is not an undefined will to murder (except in the cases of Wargrave and Norton, who are sadists). Christie's murderers, in sum, are characters that have not managed to repress their violent drives correctly; instead, they are dominated by it, and commit murder in the selfish hope of getting what they want (money, revenge, protection, pleasure...), even if it breaks the group they are supposed to look out for. They are the final fracture in the not-so-idyllic setting and group: characters that directly go against the common interest by only looking out for their own.

The effect is disquieting for the group, not only because violence and transgression are located within a safe place, but because the violence that society has so carefully repressed resurfaces in the most shocking way possible – and, more frighteningly, it is impossible to pin the blame on someone and regain peace by excluding them. Peace, indeed, is at stake, and most notably peace of mind; because what was repressed was not simply the human proneness to violence, but *the very desire to kill the victim*. The victim, we remember, was a monster too – a monster who tortured the characters so much that they can but be relieved that he or she is dead. The murder is thus not merely a horrifying act, it is a horrifying act that was *wished for*, consciously or not. The characters are thus confronted with the uncanny fulfilment of their own secret and shameful wish (see Freud 1955, 245-6), a situation in which “the distinction between imagination and reality is effaced” (Freud 1955, 244) – something that even leads a character in *Evil* to believe that she is responsible for the murder because she bought voodoo dolls and actively wished to kill the victim. The only way to exorcise this latent guilt would be to find and remove the actual culprit from the group. Then comes a very uneasy revelation: if *I* have wished for the victim's death, then the others must have wished it too. How to identify the murderer, then, when it is obvious that absolutely *everyone* had a desire and a reason to kill the victim?

3.2. “Psychological claustrophobia”⁴³: the enclosed setting as a psychological prison

3.2.1. The monster within: the enclosed setting and the human psyche

As it was established in part 3.1. of this *mémoire*, the murder committed in Agatha Christie’s closed circle mysteries is an *actualising* act. More than a simple breaking point due to continued strain in the enclosed group, it also corresponds to the resurfacing of violence that the group has tried (and failed) to repress and reject. In other words, the murder actualises a duplicity that exists from the start in the group. For this reason, I would like to argue that the murderer is not simply a double figure, but the very embodiment of duality and duplicity: the murderer, in Christie’s works, is a *Doppelgänger*, a personification of the group’s repressed desire to kill the monstrous victim.

The *Doppelgänger* is a figure that is recurrent in fantastic, supernatural and Gothic tales: it is a mirror image of a character, but a sinister one, an “uncanny harbinger of death” (Freud 1955, 235). Freud identifies the *Doppelgänger* as the epitome of the “doubling, dividing and interchanging of the self” that characterises the Uncanny (*ibid.*, 234). Indeed, the *Doppelgänger* is a figure that is at the same time familiar and unfamiliar. It is simultaneously Same and Other: on the one hand, it looks exactly like the protagonist of the story, but on the other hand, it is undeniably something strange and foreign: not only does it possess a consciousness different from that of the protagonist, who cannot know nor share its thoughts in spite of their resemblance, but it also usually displays a personality opposite to that of the protagonist. The *Doppelgänger*, like a closed circle murderer, is an actor, an imposter performing a role, as Andrew J. Webber points out in his study *The Doppelgänger: Double Visions in German Literature*: “the *Doppelgänger* is an inveterate performer of identity [...] The performances of the *Doppelgänger* will be seen as so many rehearsals of a double role” (Webber 2003, 3); as such, it is always “divided between person and persona” (*ibid.*, 8). Murderer and *Doppelgänger* are each “both a triumph of mimesis and a monster” (*ibid.*, 7): they are alter egos, Same and Other at the same time, like the murderer that seems to belong to the tight-knit group but is actually actively working against its best interests.

⁴³ Panek, LeRoy Lad. 1987. *An Introduction to the Detective Story* (Bowling Green, Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press), p. 135.

It is this relationship to the enclosed group that truly makes the murderer a *Doppelgänger*. Indeed, in Christie's novels, the division that gives birth to the *Doppelgänger* does *not* occur in the murderer's psyche: the murderer is never mad or unconscious of his or her actions. Even Lawrence Wargrave, who is admittedly split between his desire for justice and his desire to kill and can never truly reconcile his inner conflict of values and reach complete psychological unity (as emphasized by his rather childish choice to let an old nursery rhyme dictate his *modus operandi* as well as his sadism), is nevertheless completely rational – he is clever enough to carry out his plans unsuspected, and he chose his victims with the outmost care and research. Instead, the original division comes *from the group itself*. Indeed, the *Doppelgänger* is fundamentally

a slippery double-agent, carrying out the dialectical transactions of the divided self. [...] The *Doppelgänger* is characteristically at once permissive and prohibitive, both a vicarious agent and a frustrating usurper of the subject's pleasures. At the same time its performative character undoes expectations of the knowability of identity. Pleasure and unpleasure, desire and terror, co-operate in the *Doppelgänger* masquerade. (*ibid.*, 8)

The *Doppelgänger*, in other words, is a sinister figure that gets to commit the actions that the human character is unwilling or incapable to enact. It is this intense contradiction between what the human characters *must* do and what they *desire* that creates the division of the self into two beings, one that is able to cater to the character's desires and another that obeys to the rules of civilization. For this reason, the split often occurs in a dysfunctional setting where the characters are under extreme strain:

The *Doppelgänger* is typically the product of a broken home. It represents dysfunction in the family romance of structured well-being, exposing the home as the original site of the 'unheimlich'. (*ibid.*, 5)

These conditions for the creation of the *Doppelgänger* are strikingly similar to the ones leading to the emergence of a murderer in Christie's closed circles. As explained in 3.1., the murderer emerges as a result of the group's fracture that he/she brings to light. In *Christmas*, Christie (*via* Poirot) explicitly likens the creation of a murderer to an explosion of sorts. The murderer is split between the social pressure to do "the thing to do," i.e. display "a spirit of goodwill" (Christie 2001a, 103), and less moral sentiments such as hatred and resentment:

'[...] under these conditions – mental strain, physical *malaise* – it is highly probable that dislikes that were before merely mild and disagreements that were trivial might suddenly assume a more serious character. The result of pretending to be a more amiable, a more forgiving, a more high-minded person than one really is, has sooner or later the effect of causing one to behave as a more disagreeable, a more ruthless and an altogether more unpleasant person than is actually the case! If you dam the stream of natural behaviour, *mon ami*, sooner or later the dam bursts and a cataclysm occurs!' (*ibid.*, 103-4)

This incredible amount of strain and pressure on the characters goes hand in hand with the “queer” atmosphere underlined in 3.1.2. Here again, the outcome of such pressure – murder – is foreseen by several characters from the start: “like the feeling there is before a thunderstorm”; “Very soon, something will snap” (Christie 2001b, 30, 60). The imagery, in the metaphor of the dam, of the thunderstorm and of the snapping is always evocative of a *crack*. This crack is the breaking point the characters reach (see 3.1.2.), but evokes also the idea of a crack within one’s psyche, or of a crack in one’s mirror⁴⁴; it suggests the deep division within one’s self that creates the sinister *Doppelgänger*.

In Poirot’s observations just as in Webber’s analysis, this breaking is the product of a deep-seated duality of the self – in this case, of the group. In Freudian terms, this duality could be expressed in terms of a rivalry between the Id (one’s drives, desires and instincts) and the Super Ego (one’s pressure to be moral and obey the law). Christie expresses this duality in similar terms. One’s natural feelings are deemed “natural” (see excerpt above), and are compared to a “cataclysm” and a “thunderstorm,” i.e. natural catastrophes. Indeed, storms often occur in novels that represent a complete victory of this desire over societal conventions: in *None*, it is a storm that entraps the characters on the island and enable Wargrave to carry out his sadistic project, and in *Orient Express*, the train is caught in a snowdrift and stops at the very moment when Ratchett is murdered in revenge. Isolation, in these conditions, corresponds to a complete cutting off of the characters from the ‘civilised,’ constraining society of the outside. “Mental strain and physical malaise,” on the other hand, are exclusively related to society. Nevertheless, isolation from society at large does *not* mean that this strain is inexistent in the enclosed group. As seen in 2.3., isolation frees from the constraints of the outside world, but it also creates a dangerous tendency to individualism; this also means that the cramped conditions of the enclosed group re-create a social situation that leads to strain and pressure, as is observed in *Mesopotamia*: “If people are too much cooped up together it’s got a way of getting on their nerves” (Christie 2001b, 27). Enclosing and isolating the setting are thus a way for Christie to create a circle that is subject to intense social pressure, but that feels free enough from the eye of the law to be open to the idea of murder as a solution; enclosure and isolation thus mean impunity here (at least partially), like Doyle posited (see 1.2.2.). It is this paradox that is used in *None*: Wargrave’s choice of an

⁴⁴ Significantly, Christie uses this image in the aptly named *The Mirror Crack’d from Side to Side*, in which the metaphor refers to the very moment when Marina Gregg discovers who the person who allegedly ruined her life is and she decides, in that split second, to enact revenge and kill this person. The image of the cracked mirror thus corresponds in Christie’s stories to the breaking point that means murder – a relevant image given that *psyche* is the Greek word for mirror, thus drawing an explicit link between the crack and one’s consciousness...

island cuts him off from society and legality to allow him to carry out his project, but it also serves as a means of torture for the enclosed group, as I will develop later in this part.

This duality is thus expressly connected to enclosure: in fact, the enclosed settings represent this split between conscious social respectability and a repressed desire for aggression and murder, as I have already hinted at in 3.1.2. Indeed, Christie's enclosed settings always embody two irreconcilable extremes at the same time. This opposition can be topographical: in *Styles* and *Mesopotamia*, for instance, characters live on two different, opposite sides of the house, which betrays a split between them. In addition, in *Mesopotamia*, the awkward cohabitation of rooms dedicated to personal life and rooms dedicated to work reveals a polarity: the house is trying to be *both* a place for work and a home, creating an imbalance that the characters never manage to solve (see 2.2.2.). More largely, *Mesopotamia* is extremely concerned with this pattern of duality: it is a novel where everything is dual – even the murderer, who assumes two identities, and the victim, seen either as a monster or as a loving person. The novel is marked by the issue of optics: on several occasions, the narrator Amy Leatheran observes that things can look very different when observed by two different people, or at two separate occasions, or even from two different angles. This is for instance the case of Hassanieh, the small town near the house:

It took us about four hours to get to Hassanieh, which, to my surprise, was quite a big place. Very pretty it looked, too, before we got there from the other side of the river – standing up quite white and fairy-like with minarets. It was a bit different, though, when one had crossed the bridge and come right into it. Such a smell and everything ramshackle and tumble-down, and mud and mess everywhere. (Christie 2001b, 33)

The setting, depending on the angle it is seen from, is either fairy-tale-like or dirty-looking, meaning that the duality is also located between the main stage of the plot (the setting) and the surroundings (the frame, see 2.1.2.): the setting is thus characterised by its ambiguity that is metaphorised through space. This identity (or lack thereof) of the setting, marked by an intense polarity, is also to be found in *Orient Express*. This novel presents the reader with several paradoxes: a homely setting that is lost in the middle of nowhere; the ability to map the small space as opposed to the inability to locate the position of the train; a train – an object of movement – that is immobile. It is this last paradox that is most interesting. The train's mobility enables it to go home, to go back to civilisation where it is supposed to go; but instead, it remains stuck in the middle of nowhere, frozen in a tempest in a country that an Englishman from Christie's time would call 'uncivilised'. The small confined space seems controlled by two different forces, one that strives to regain civilisation and another that allows the murder to be committed far from the judgement and gaze of society. In this novel,

it is the desire to kill Ratchett that wins out, as exemplified by the fact that the train stops at the very moment when Ratchett is stabbed.

Because those settings represent two extremes at once and can never quite solve this polarisation and instability, they become what Whitney Shylee May calls “interstitial places” in her article “The Influence of Place on Identity in Poe’s “Morella” and “William Wilson”” (May 2017, 223). Such settings become “transitive zone[s] between [...] binaries” (*ibid.*, 228) which is characteristic of Foucault’s heterotopias: a heterotopia is by definition an in-between, “a place without a place” (Foucault 1967), a setting that is paradoxically able to juxtapose different spaces in one locus (*ibid.*). This interstitial quality of Christie’s settings is what makes them, according to May, an ideal place for the emergence of a *Doppelgänger*: “the precise locus of such profound horror lies in the *entre-deux* space between unreconciled subject and object” (May 2017, 230). This lack of clear-cut boundary between the various functions of the setting also echoes the upset boundary between self and other, but also between conscious and unconscious, that is at the heart of the *Doppelgänger* story. This permanent hesitation gives the setting an undefined dimension (in spite of the setting’s clearly delineated boundaries), which participates in the uncanny effect: the setting was initially assigned a clear role (to be a refuge against the outside world and a warrant of social unity), but just as this role is upset, the setting’s new role cannot be defined. This evasiveness creates cognitive dissonance: first between the cohabitation of the setting’s assigned role (a cognitive one, see 2.3.1.) and reality, and secondly, between the two psychological extremes the setting embodies at once.

We have already seen that settings may represent the characters’ personalities, the group’s problems, or echo the psychological atmosphere (see 2.1.1., 2.2.2., 3.1.2.). However, in this light, it is possible to see the settings as being, first and foremost, a metaphorical mental landscape that corresponds to the characters’ split between conscious and unconscious, between the need to go back and conform to civilisation and the desire to remain far away from its restrictions, between the fairy-tale and the ‘savagery’ (as embodied by Oriental settings; see 2.1.2.). In fact, Christie explicitly likens the “natural behaviour” to the unconscious in *Appointment*:

There are such strange things buried down in the unconscious. A lust for power – a lust for cruelty – a savage desire to tear and rend – all the inheritance of our past racial memories... They are all there, [...] all the cruelty and savagery and lust... We shut the door on them and deny them conscious life, but sometimes they are too strong. (Christie 1992, 54)

The metaphor of “shutting the door” to the unconscious is particularly remarkable here, for it is the process of enclosure itself that Christie describes in so many words.⁴⁵ The act of denying unconscious feelings and repressing socially unacceptable drives thus consists in compartmentalising these feelings and in hiding them away from the world – but enclosure is what leads directly to tension and murder. This metaphor allows for a direct comparison between the enclosed setting and the troubled human psyche. Janet Carsten and Stephen Hugh-Jones indeed theorise that there exists a reciprocal relationship between setting and psyche: “House, body and mind are in continuous interaction, the physical structure, furnishing, social conventions and mental images of the house at once enabling, moulding, informing and constraining the activities and ideas which unfold within its bounds” (Carsten and Hugh-Jones 1995, 2). This reciprocity is perhaps most explicitly drawn in *Christmas*. At the moment when Simeon Lee is (allegedly) murdered, the family’s house becomes labyrinthine:

They raced up the stairs and round the bend, past a recess with statues gleaming white and eerie, and along the straight passage to Simeon Lee’s door. Mr Farr was there already and Mrs David. She was leaning back against the wall and he was twisting at the doorhandle.

‘The door’s locked,’ he was saying. ‘The door’s locked!’ (Christie 2001a, 96)

The house that is described here is full of twists, turns, and dead ends, and reminds one of a maze. It is a tricky place where people can get lost easily. Relevantly, the suspects are not able to say which family member was where at this moment. The fact that the novel provides no map adds to this disorientation (although the characters are not able to say who was where even in novels where there is a map, meaning that the setting/psyche remains fundamentally unknowable and unmappable). The Gothic-like elements – the eerie white statues, among which Pilar was hidden as we learn later on (*ibid.*, 295), the locked room motif, the “horrible high wailing scream” of the victim (*ibid.*, 95), and the blood of the victim, “too much blood,” reminding one of “sacrificial blood” (*ibid.*, 121) – finalise this transformation of the enclosed setting into a haunted, terrifying mindscape in which the characters’ most terrible fantasies of violence come true. The enclosed setting can thus be seen as a representation of the characters’ unconscious, as Poirot himself muses in *Lord Edgware Dies*: “each one of us is a dark mystery, a maze of conflicting passions and desires and aptitudes” (Christie 2003b, 16).

⁴⁵ In the same novel, Christie also observes that “[asylums] are filled with human beings who were unable to face being mediocre, insignificant, ineffective and who therefore created for themselves ways of escape from reality so as to be shut off from life itself forever” (Christie 1992, 59). The enclosure described here resembles the characters’ initial isolation as the cause of their problems (see 2.2). The double edge of the word ‘asylum’ – which refers both to a mental institution and to a refuge – indicates once again the easy reversibility of an enclosed shelter into a damaged psyche.

Mark Edmundson notices in *Nightmare on Main Street: Angels, Sadoomasochism, and the Culture of the Gothic* that the Gothic haunted house (a role that Christie's settings take on) is the physical version of the psyche as it is analysed by Freud:

For Freud, the psyche, however else he may describe it, is centrally the haunted house of terror Gothic. Freud's remarkable achievement is to have taken the props and passions of terror Gothic – hero-villain, heroine, terrible place, haunting – and to have relocated them inside the self. What haunts the psyche? Its traumatic past [...]. (Edmundson 1999, 32)

In Christie, the “traumatic past” is the murder: shrouded in mystery, unseen by the characters and untold in the narrative, it is a traumatic event that has been rejected, erased from conscious memory. The closed domestic setting – absolute, self-focused and self-sufficient – where the characters are supposed to feel free to be themselves and where the requirements of outside society are rejected is the perfect locale to explore the horrors of the inside – inside of the setting and group, but also inside of themselves. The boundary separating the physical inside from the outside thus becomes a symbol of the boundary between the conscious (or social consciousness) and the unconscious. As such, the setting's physical boundaries are finally demonstrated to be the reverse of what they should be: they do not protect the characters from the monstrousness of the outside; they entrap them with their own, insidious monstrousness. The characters are trapped physically and mentally (and socially, as I will demonstrate in 3.2.2.), in a fashion inspired by Poe's Gothic tales (see 1.1.2.). If no rational force from the outside comes to correctly interpret the clues hidden in the setting/psyche, exorcise the characters' guilt and restore order, then the murderer wins and the characters are lost – as in *None*. The detective, in this light, is thus not only the rational force paradoxically coming from outside – i.e. a place of supposed danger – but also a psychoanalyst of sorts whose role is to unveil what was hidden and reconstitute the truth from the puzzle he is given. This gist of the detective's – and most notably Poirot's, who is after all the detective who is most often confronted to closed circles and the one whose method relies on psychology – is mentioned in *Mesopotamia*: ““You would have made a good archaeologist, M. Poirot. You have the gift of re-creating the past”” (Christie 2001b, 348). The comparison is interesting, for Freud thought of psychoanalysis as a form of archaeology:

Just as the archaeologist builds up the walls from the foundations that have remained standing, determines the number and position of the columns from depressions in the floor and reconstructs the mural decorations and paintings from the remains found in the debris, so does the analyst proceed when he draws his inferences from the fragments of memories, from the associations and from the behaviour of the subject of analysis (Freud 1953, 360).

The process also resembles the detective's technique, who relies on the characters' behaviour, memories, and lies, and on scattered physical proof to solve the murder. Susan Rowland thus mentions that the detective's own methods of questioning, his 'talking cure' for crime", his idea that "talking to suspects" is the "key" to finding the truth by way of analysing "inconsistencies and slips of the tongue" (as well as an occasional use of psychoanalytic language) make the detective (and especially Poirot) an analyst of sorts (Rowland 2001, 93). If the setting is a metaphor for the characters' psyche, then Poirot's ability to understand the meaning of physical and architectural clues and to recreate the characters' actual comings and goings in the setting also accounts for Poirot's role as an analyst.

It is truly noteworthy that this relation between psyche and setting is most visible in *Christmas*, a novel in which the characters' unconscious desire to kill is represented the most vividly. In this novel, Magdalene Lee inquires about Simeon Lee's testamentary dispositions and comes to see his passing away as the solution to her financial problems (Christie 2001a, 42), and her husband George considers the event of Simeon's possible death rather coldly, in monetary terms (*ibid.*, 44): their wish to see Simeon dead is rather clear. The characters of Lydia and David display even more evidently an unconscious desire to *kill* Simeon. As I have explained in 2.2.2., Lydia builds dioramas of the independent, Eden-like life she aspires to but cannot have. Next to these wishful representations, she built another diorama, a sinister representation of the Dead Sea that is described as "arid" and willingly unattractive (*ibid.*, 31). This morbid diorama – significantly created after a fight with her husband about Simeon's tyrannical ways – is not escapist, but like its counterparts, it expresses one of Lydia's wishes: for Simeon to die. David's wish is similarly hinted at. His wife Hilda believes that he sees his father Simeon as a monster, an ogre of sorts (*ibid.*, 39): indeed, David resents Simeon for having abused his wife and led her to her premature death. It is significant, then, that the thing David first remembers when he is in the house again is his mother reading him the tale of Jack the Giant Killer: it is implied that David sees himself as a giant killer as well, the David that could take the monstrous Goliath figure that his father embodies. This wish to kill is further underlined by his playing the Dead March on the piano seconds only before his father is discovered dead: the valet Tressillian takes this event as the sign that "things were very wrong" (*ibid.*, 95) and Hilda herself acknowledges that in this moment, "[t]he wish to kill was in his heart" (*ibid.*, 222).

Lydia and David are extreme examples of this unconscious desire to kill, but all characters in *Christmas* and, by extension, all of Christie's novels, are assumed to have felt, at some point, this desire to kill the victim. This opinion is stated in many of Christie's novels (one

may mention *Appointment*: “Not only was Mrs Boynton killed in cold blood – but every member of her family was aware of the fact! Collectively they reacted as guilty parties” (Christie 1992, 273), but most plainly in *Curtain*. In this novel, where the murderer possesses the ability to tempt normal people into committing murder, Poirot writes to Hastings:

Everyone is a potential murderer. In everyone there arises from time to time the *wish* to kill — though not the *will* to kill. How often have you not felt or heard others say: "She made me so furious I felt I could have killed her!" "I could have killed B. for saying so-and-so!" "I was so angry I could have murdered him!" And all those statements are literally true. Your mind at such moments is quite clear. You would like to kill so-and-so. *But you do not do it.* Your will has to assent to your desire. In young children, the brake is as yet acting imperfectly. I have known a child, annoyed by its kitten, say: "Keep still or I'll hit you on the head and kill you" and actually do so — to be stunned and horrified a moment later when it realizes that the kitten's life will not return — because, you see, really the child loves that kitten dearly. (Christie 2002a, 260-1; italics in the original)

In this excerpt, Christie draws a clear difference between the *wish* and the *will* to kill. If murder is an actualising act, the murderer is the entity that crosses the bridge that the other characters, held back by their moral maturity, cannot cross; the “brake” of morality that restrains most characters does not work for the murderer, and his/her desires and drives win out. In doing so, the murderer enacts the entire group’s latent wish.

It is this enactment of an unconscious, well-repressed desire that truly makes the murderer a *Doppelgänger*. Freud notices that the double is “a creation dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted” (Freud 1955, 236): Christie similarly compares the murderer to a child, a morally immature being that has not assimilated the rules of society and repressed its desires into its unconscious. For this reason, the murderer is the agent that gets to act on the group’s drives and desires.⁴⁶ And indeed, most characters are satisfied with the victim’s death – or, when the murder occurs in a society of strangers, remain mostly indifferent to it. In *Christmas*, for instance, both David and Lydia are content with Simeon’s death: upon discovering his body, David quotes that “The mills of God grind slowly” (Christie 2001a, 97) and Lydia quotes Lady Macbeth (“Who would have thought the old man to have had so much blood in him?...”, *ibid.*). David sees this death as a just retribution, and Lydia sees her ambitions of independence fulfilled with this murder. In fact, most characters win something with his death – revenge, money, independence. The sentiment is not limited to *Christmas*; it is also observed in many other novels, such as *Styles*:

⁴⁶ In fact, several of Christie’s murderers explicitly enact a childhood dream. Sugden in *Christmas* enacts a rather Oedipal wish of killing his father, Wargrave in *None* has dreamt of killing people since childhood, and in *Curtain* Poirot traces Norton’s sadistic tendencies directly back to his childhood. *Crooked House* is also a striking case, for the murderer is actually ten-year-old Josephine: she murders her tyrannical grandfather (a Simeon Lee figure) for the childish reason that he refused to let her have dance lessons.

Was the family prostrated by grief? Was the sorrow at Mrs. Inglethorp's death so great? I realized that there was an emotional lack in the atmosphere. The dead woman had not the gift of commanding love. Her death was a shock and a distress, but she would not be passionately regretted. (Christie 2007, 59)

We find in this extract the ambiguity that is characteristic of the *Doppelgänger*. As mentioned above, Webber determines that the *Doppelgänger's* main characteristic is its duality in relation with the subject: it is at once “permissive and prohibitive,” “a vicarious agent and a frustrating usurper of the subject's pleasures,” a being that creates “pleasure and unpleasure, desire and terror” (see above). This duality is expressed in this extract from *Styles*. On the one hand, the characters do indeed derive *some* pleasure from the victim's death: the victim is not mourned and in fact the characters benefit from his/her death. The murderer was permissive in that he acted out the group's most shameful desire, i.e. he allowed violence to explode once and for all and gave them the opportunity to gain what they wanted without being compromised. Yet, at the same time, the presence of this unidentified murderer causes “shock and distress”; indeed, it creates terror and unpleasantness in the group, for reasons that are best summarised by Poirot himself in *Mesopotamia*:

‘It is clear, therefore, that you do not understand the A B C of the position. There are unpleasantnesses! Yes, there are a lot of unpleasantnesses. To begin with, there is *suspicion*. [...] Suspicion! Let us not make the bones about it. *You are all under suspicion here in this house.*’ (Christie 2001b, 127-8)

The murderer enacts the group's secret desires, but at what price? These desires are deeply wrong – which is why they had to remain safely enclosed away in the characters' unconscious – and their being acted out demands punishment; but the murderer is an elusive being that, while it is Other in nature, cannot be distinguished from the innocent. The unpleasantness comes from the suspicion that will characterise the characters for the remainder of the novel, as they will wonder endlessly: *one of us – but which one?*

3.2.2. “When is a friend not a friend?”⁴⁷: the terror of duplicity

The problem posed by the murderer is that, while he/she is fundamentally different from the rest of the group in terms of moral consciousness, he/she, in true *Doppelgänger* fashion, is a perfect lookalike: he/she seems to belong to the group, and does not look any different. This paradox is acknowledged for example in *Crooked House*: while murderers “are set apart, they are ‘different’ – murder is wrong – but not for them” and virtually set aside by a “mark of Cain” of sorts (which the character speaking identifies as a complete lack of remorse), they are also identified as “nice ordinary chaps” (Christie 1986, 110). As we have seen before, appearances are deceptive, and the murderer is virtually indistinguishable from the other, innocent characters. This quality of the murderer’s is most striking in *Christmas*: in this novel, the character that enacts the family’s general wish is Sugden, a police superintendent who is also Simeon Lee’s illegitimate son. As a result of this kinship, Sugden shares physical characteristics with Simeon Lee, Harry Lee, but also Stephen Farr, another illegitimate son of Simeon’s visiting Gorston Hall: “the same build, the same gestures [...], the same habit of laughing with the head thrown back, the same distinctive high-bridged nose” (Christie 2001a, 221). This leads to an effect of *déjà-vu* and doubling, an optic trick to which the short-sighted butler Tressillian is particularly sensitive:

‘It seems sometimes, sir, as though the past isn’t the past! [...] There’s a feeling comes over you – as though you’d done everything before. It just seems to me as though the bell rings and I go to answer it and there’s Mr Harry – even if it should be Mr Farr or some other person – I’m just saying to myself – *but I’ve done this before...*’ (Christie 2001a, 183)

This strange feeling – that is later described as things being “altered, unreal” (*ibid.*, 288) – corresponds exactly to what Freud described as characteristic of the Uncanny: an unsettling mix of familiarity and foreignness that creates uncertainty. Freud also identifies the motif of repetition as an uncanny one (Freud 1955, 236): in the case of *Christmas*, this insistence of the motif of the double creates an almost fantastic feeling that is inherent to the *Doppelgänger* experience. The murderer is thus a literal *Doppelgänger*, similar to the rest of the group (one will notice the repetition of the word “same” in Sugden’s description above), yet alien to it (one will also notice that the experience of meeting the murderer is considered “altering,” thus associating the murderer with otherness). Murderers, in Christie’s novels, look profoundly *ordinary* and metaphorically look like the others, which precludes their identification. While

⁴⁷ Quote taken from *Hickory Dickory Death* (Christie 1956, 105).

this absence of individuality in a human being is also what makes representation uncanny⁴⁸, it also means that *everybody* must be suspected, without exception.

A clue to help identify the murderer could be the social mask that he/she is wearing, the very symbol of his/her duplicity. The problem, however, is that the murderer is not the only character wearing a mask. In *Dumb Witness*, while Hastings acknowledges that it is Poirot's role to lift the murderer's mask, he also considers that every single suspect wears one:

In the course of my association with Poirot I had assisted at many such a scene. A little company of people, all outwardly composed with well-bred masks for faces. And I had seen Poirot strip the mask from one face and show it for what it was – *the face of a killer!* Yes, there was no doubt of it. *One of these people was a murderer!* But which? Even now I was not *sure*. (Christie 2002b, 387-8, italics in the original)

What is acknowledged in this extract is that every character wears a mask of sorts. This mask is a social one, “well-bred” and “composed” so as to conceal the shameful desires and the secrets the characters do not want others to know. This is once again commented upon in *Sad Cypress*: “The human face is, after all, nothing more nor less than a mask. [...] Underneath is the primitive man or woman” (Christie 2001e, 65). In other words, each character's face is but an appearance hiding the unconscious desires analysed in my previous section. The murderer's mask is no different, and the murderer could wear anyone's face; similarly, no character is immune to the temptation to kill, and there is no tell-tale sign (no ‘mark of Cain’) to indicate which one did cross the bridge between unconscious wish and conscious action.

In this light, it is not simply the murderer that is guilty of duplicity, but each and every character. This is what Amy Leatheran, the narrator of *Mesopotamia*, notices as well when all the suspects are assembled in front of Poirot (in a situation similar to Hastings' just above): “now, somehow they seemed *different* – like a piece of fusty old stuff you take into the light and suddenly see the rich colours of an old embroidery” (Christie 2001b, 302). As Amy points out, the problem at the heart of Christie's closed circles is an issue of *optics*. Just as any object may have a double signification – it seems innocuous, but is actually a clue, or a red herring –, each character can be seen differently depending on the angle he or she is looked at. This duality, which we have already observed in Christie's settings and in the murderer, is

⁴⁸ In “The Uncanny,” Freud posits that the uncanny also pertains to the eerie inability to tell life-like objects such as automatons and dolls from actual living people (Freud 1955, 226). In *Christmas* for instance, Sugden uses an ingenious mechanism to mimic Simeon's drying scream, making this sound as confusing as it is frightening: some characters identify this sound as coming from “a soul in hell,” others as the scream of a soulless creature, and others as an inhuman or animal scream (Christie 2001a, 323). This confusion is redolent of Poe's “Rue Morgue,” in which several witnesses attest that the murderer spoke in various languages when in fact they heard an orang-utan scream. This impossibility of telling the human and the inhuman apart culminates in Christie's *None in Wargrave*'s fake death scene. The murderer's ability to prevent identification (be it his/her, the victim's, or the identification of the moment of death, or of the significance of a clue) is not only what protects the murderer, but also what creates and complicates the mystery.

thus to be found even among the innocent, and complicates the process of identification of the murderer. This revelation is deeply unsettling as well, for the homelike inside is supposed to be the place where the characters, free from the dangers of the outside, can let go of the mask and be themselves, which the constrained society of the enclosed setting makes impossible. Instead, the fact that the enclosed space is a deeply social place prevents it from being homely and intimate, making it unhomely.

This realisation of the characters' inherent duplicity gives Christie's closed circle mysteries a particular atmosphere. In theory, the reduction of the number of suspects to a small group comprised within the enclosed setting *should* be reassuring in that it delineates a finite number of solutions, which prevents the detective and the characters from being confronted with a virtually endless list of suspects. However, in Christie's novels, this finite number of solutions generates discomfort and terror among the characters. What is at stake, here, is the unity of the group: enclosure reveals that someone within the allegedly cohesive group is Other. This realisation is traumatic for the characters within that group. A small extract from *Sparkling Cyanide* – in which the victim, Rosemary Barton, is murdered during a dinner between friends and family – exposes this trauma:

'But I've got to *know*. I've got to find out. You've got to help me, Iris. You've got to *think*. You've got to remember. That's it – *remember*. Go back over that night again and again. Because you do see, don't you, that if she was killed, it *must have been someone who was at the table that night?* You do see that, don't you?'

Yes, she had seen that. There was no pushing aside the remembrance of that scene any longer. She must remember it all. The music, the roll of drums, the lowered lights, the cabaret and the lights going up again and Rosemary sprawled forward on the table, her face blue and convulsed.

Iris shivered. She was frightened now – horribly frightened...

She must think – go back – remember. [...] There was to be no oblivion." (Christie 2002c, 45-6; emphases in the original)

In this extract, the evidence that the murderer must be "one of us" – a fact that the italicisation heavily emphasises – is directly connected to the trauma of seeing the victim die. The manner in which the flashback is depicted is a clear rendering of shock and anguish: the rapid succession of unconnected sensory reminiscences superposing the fun of the cabaret and the dead body gives a disjointed, almost stroboscopic vision of the murder. This trauma is also linked to the uncanny feeling of seeing a previously alive person turned into a lifeless corpse: in "The Uncanny," Freud explains that the blurring of the dividing line between inanimate objects and humans is terrifying, creating eeriness and revulsion (Freud 1955, 226). It is clear that this is a memory best forgotten: it sends the witnesses spiralling. Yet, as stated in the excerpt, oblivion is impossible. Two types of memories are connected here: the distressing

memory of the death, unwillingly recalled, and a conscious effort to remember the events of the dinner in order to understand a death that makes little sense. Recalling the former is invariably pondering on the latter. This question thus appears as traumatic as the death itself, and hints that there can be no closure until the mystery is lifted. Iris' traumatic spiralling thus turns into fright at the implied (but unvoiced) question: 'which one of us did it?'

The traumatism of the murder is thus indistinguishable to the traumatism of the presence of an unidentified murderer amidst the group. That the very thought of this presence is terrorising is revealed through the characters' reaction to this revelation: their first impulse is usually to completely deny this truth and to try and pin the blame on an outsider. In *Christmas*, for instance, Lydia Lee – who in this case echoes every character of Christie's – exclaims in distress, "Oh! If only it could be a stranger – not a member of the family" (Christie 2001a, 248). Lydia herself admits to being a hypocrite: not only does she think that it is "quite natural that one of his family should murder [Simeon]," but Poirot is also of the opinion that Lydia has an idea who the murderer is (*ibid.*, 226, 248). But instead of admitting this fact – to Poirot, but also to herself – Lydia's first impulse is to reject any idea of duplicity within her family and to hold on to an ideal of family unity that does not exist. Lydia finds the idea of the murderer being one of theirs "awful" (*ibid.*, 226) and thinks the existence of this murderer is reflective of the group as a whole: she says that "To bring that person to justice will mean bringing shame and disgrace on us all..." (*ibid.*, 247) – an admission, implicit perhaps, that the murder is to some extent seen as the wish of all characters. The idea of guilt coming from inside is seen as not only appalling, but also scandalous. Even characters that unlike Lydia do not have any inkling regarding the murderer's identity are greatly disturbed by the presence of a murderer. Harry Lee (who is not very keen on family loyalty) thus declares: "then someone here in the house killed him... But who the devil could have done it? [...] there's only the family. And for the life of me I can't see one of us doing it. [...] So who did? Blessed if I know. But it's damned disturbing" (*ibid.*, 142). For such characters, that any member of the group committed murder is unimaginable, and to be confronted with the factual truth creates yet another cognitive dissonance between two irreconcilable extremes.

For this reason, many characters refer to the sheer impossibility of the murderer being "one of us." They regularly call the situation unreal:

'It's like a nightmare – so fantastic – I can't believe it's *real!*' (Christie 2001a, 225)

[...] we realized that the thing was not a bad dream, but a tangible reality. We had read of such things – now we ourselves were actors in the drama. (Christie 2007, 160)

I was caught up once more by the fantastic notion that one of these people was a dangerous and cold-blooded murderer. Somehow, on this beautiful still sunny morning it seemed impossible. (Christie 2001b, 229)

The reference to the world of drama is rather telling: one tends to see this event as a fictional one, something that is *virtual* – it happens to others, *outside*, and may be witnessed from a distance by reading the press, but it has no reality. For the characters, finding themselves *actors* in this unbelievable situation is nightmarish; the use of the term “actors” suggests that they are not even *agents* within this narrative, but trapped in a pantomime.

In this light, the murderer easily appears as a Gothic monster of sorts. As we have seen before, he/she dwells best in interstitial situations – always located in-between Self and Other, unconscious desire and conscious action, but also in-between nightmare and reality. He/she embodies the uncomfortable liminality that is characteristic of the monsters that haunt Gothic settings – which Christie’s settings are. The characters systematically try to make him/her a complete Other by calling him/her a “devil”:

‘Why shouldn’t this man – this devil – have got in earlier and concealed himself somewhere?’ (Christie 2001b, 118)

“I agree that one of us is possessed by a devil.” (Christie 2011, 151)

“There is, as I have said, a devil amongst us.” (*ibid.*, 154)

The intent behind this term is to dehumanise the murderer: insisting on his/her inhumanity is a means of rejecting the murderer’s belonging to the group – not unlike the ancient Greeks who called ‘barbarians’ everyone who was not Greek. Because the murderer is a *moral* monster, not a real supernatural entity, denying this character humanity is an affirmation that the character never belonged to the group to begin with. This rejection of the criminal is also a resistance to the uncomfortable revelation of their own desire to harm the victim which the investigation reveals. Nevertheless, by closing off all the thresholds that could enable the slightest communication with the outside world, Christie eliminates the comfortable possibility that an outsider committed the crime. Moreover, the embedding of enclosure in the setting (see 2.1.1.) is precisely meant to underline that the transgression *always* comes from inside: Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor associates the characters’ frantic struggle with the victim’s locked door as a violation, a rape-connoted scene (Mijolla-Mellor 2006, 147-8). For instance in *Styles*:

We strained and heaved together. The framework of the door was solid, and for a long time it resisted our efforts, but at last we felt it give beneath our weight, and finally, with a resounding crash, it was burst open. (Christie 2007, 46)

As Mijolla-Mellor observes, the closed door of the victim's bedroom is the symbol of intimacy (Mijolla-Mellor 2006, 149). The characters' forceful breaking of that door (underlined by means of a vocabulary emphasising both the solidity of the door and the violence of the characters' entry) is perceived as a brutal penetration of the victim's privacy. What is troubling is that this penetration has *already* occurred: the victim is dying (or, in the case of *Orient Express* and *Mesopotamia*, is already dead) and only someone from the victim's closed social circle (social circle delineated by the physical boundaries of the setting so as to ensure unity) could have entered this realm of privacy. Because the locked room (be it a locked berth as in *Orient Express*, or a bedroom in *Styles*, *Christmas*, and *Mesopotamia*, or, figuratively, one's exclusive seat as in *Clouds* or *Cards*) is the epitome of privacy within an already private and exclusive setting (especially since the victim's personal room can be seen as the centre of the victim's power), the murderer's status as an inside transgressor is reinforced, similarly to Larsan in Leroux's novels (see 1.3.2.), and so is the horror of the characters' wish fulfilment. This horror is only reinforced by the various unexplainable mysteries surrounding the murder: the first of these mysteries is of course to know how the murderer could have entered a locked room (as in *Orient Express*, *Mesopotamia*, and *Christmas*), but the mysterious circumstances of the crime matter also (for instance the appearance of a face behind Mrs Leidner's window and the presence of an intruder at night in the antika-room in *Mesopotamia*, the theft of the diamonds in *Christmas*, etc.). By breaking into the monstrous victim's refuge and turning it into a scene of unexplainable horror, the murderer becomes more powerful than the victim.

The problem, of course, is that the detective's investigation reveals that all the characters had easy access to the victim's refuge (see 2.2.2. and 3.3.1.), or reasons, means and opportunities to do so (see 3.3.1.). The enclosed setting thus turns into a nightmare of duplicity in which not only is everybody double-faced, but the murderer him- or herself has no face and no identity. The murderer cannot have an identity because having an identity is, at core, being recognised as an individual. And how to recognise an individual that remains hidden?⁴⁹ Most worryingly, how to recognise the murderer when the desire to kill is not

⁴⁹ This principle is redolent of Uri Eisenzweig's theory of the criminal's non-identity: in a locked room paradigm, the criminal is paradoxically absent (since no one could have entered) and yet present (since someone *did* commit the murder) in the locked room. Eisenzweig posits that this extraordinary quality of the murderer's is best exemplified in Poe's "Murders in the Rue Morgue," in which the murderer is initially seen as inhuman: the narrator suspects that only a madman could have committed such a murder – the madman being a good example of non-identity. In the end, the murderer is revealed to be an orang-utan, i.e. an inhuman entity that perfectly embodies the principle of non-identity (Eisenzweig 1986, 66-8). In Christie's novels, the designation of the criminal as a fiendish monster works similarly: it is the very lack of identity that makes the murderer monstrous and frightening.

unique to this character, but shared by the entire group? In this light, the murderer becomes a polymorphic figure, whom it is impossible to define, and yet capable of assuming every character's face. Manuel Aguirre believes this characteristic to be the essence of the Gothic monster:

Our inability to grasp the Other makes it disorientating, hence terrifying; and not least among the terrors of the [Gothic] is the fact that we cannot quite tell it from our own world: it is part of and yet profoundly alien to the human realm. Inherently ambiguous, its position vis-a-vis us is best viewed as liminal; that we cannot determine its boundaries is congruent with the fact that the Gothic Other partakes of the nature of boundaries: it is a threshold area or a threshold quality. (Aguirre n.d., 2)

Even though the murderer is unidentifiable, its presence is perceived: “I *felt* that the murderer was in the room. Sitting with us – listening. *One of us...*” (Christie 2001b, 139). As posited by Aguirre, this presence is liminal: this predatory presence is at the same time completely alien yet well integrated within the group, ungraspable yet within hand's reach, omnipresent but virtually invisible. This makes him/her “a dark power which is transcendental in the eyes of the characters; [...] the haunter [...] behind the door” (Aguirre 1990, 2006): it is human, but possesses the same powers as a monster whose influence is felt by the whole group. This elusiveness and liminality (paradoxical in a closed setting) is noticed in *Orient Express*:

‘The matter begins to clear itself up wonderfully! The murderer was a man of great strength, he was feeble, it was a woman, it was a right-handed person, it was a left-handed person – *Ah! c'est rigolo, tout ça!*’ (Christie 2001c, 84)

While in *Orient Express* this is a clue that everybody in the wagon is indeed a murderer this indication is not at first perceived by the reader as indicative that one should look for several murderers – because, until the murderer is identified, he or she is metaphorically *everyone*.⁵⁰

This uncertainty is odious for the innocent characters, for several reasons. John Cavendish summarises them in *Styles*:

[...] Screaming headlines in every paper in the country – damn all journalists, I say! Do you know there was a whole crowd staring in at the lodge gates this morning? Sort of Madame Tussaud's chamber of horrors business that can be seen for nothing. Pretty thick, isn't it? [...] It can last long enough for us never to be able to hold up our heads again. [...] Enough to make a man morbid, to be stalked by beastly journalists and stared

⁵⁰ On a biographical note, this quality of the murderer's might be explained by a recurring nightmare Christie had in her childhood. She often dreamt of ‘the Gunman’: “It was his mere presence that was frightening. The dream would be quite ordinary [...] Then suddenly a feeling of uneasiness would come. There was someone – someone *who ought not to be there* – a horrid feeling of fear: and then I would see him – sitting at the tea table, walking along the beach, joining in the game. [...] Sometimes, as we sat round a tea table, I would look across at a friend, or a member of the family, and I would suddenly realize that it was *not* Dorothy or Phyllis or Monty, or my mother or whoever it might be. The pale blue eyes in the familiar face met mine – under the familiar appearance. *It was really the Gunman*” (Christie 1977, 25). The Gunman hiding behind any face during an ordinary, festive opportunity is strikingly similar to Christie's murderers...

at by gaping moon-faced idiots, wherever he goes! But there's worse than that. [...] Have you ever thought, Hastings – it's a nightmare to me – who did it? I can't help feeling sometimes it must have been an accident. Because – because – who could have done it? Now Inglethorp's out of the way, there's no one else; no one, I mean, except – one of us.' (Christie 2007, 199-200-1)

The first reason Cavendish lists is a social one: the unsolved case causes a problem of publicity – we see here Leroux's influence. As mentioned already, outing the murderer brings shame on the family, but the reverse situation is just as torturous: the murder brings public interest on the enclosed group, meaning that what little is left of the privacy and safety of the enclosed setting is ripped to shreds. Hastings mentions that "the house was constantly besieged by reporters" (*ibid.*, 178). The vocabulary of violence suggests invasion: the public sphere mixes itself with the private one, definitively infringing upon the characters' privacy. This interest is morbid, as evidenced by the metaphor likening the closed setting to "Madame Tussaud's chamber of horrors." This reference is interesting, for this chamber of horrors historically refers to the famous exhibition of the mannequins of known murderers and criminals.⁵¹ Because the murderer is not identified, the Cavendishes are *all* seen as monsters and criminals by the public eye – it is, once again, a problem of optics: the public eye tends to see the whole closed circle as guilty of duplicity. As a result, the members of the circle are rejected from society, a problem that is particularly developed in *Clouds*: because they are distrusted by the public, two characters find their careers and their finances plummeting. Indeed, "until one person is proved guilty beyond any possible doubt, everyone else who is associated with the crime is liable to suffer in varying degrees" (Christie 2015, 158).

As acknowledged in this quote, the fact that everybody looks guilty creates *doubt* – a doubt implicitly expressed by John Cavendish himself. The absence of a guilty person (or an ideal scapegoat, such as Inglethorp) means first that every character *within the circle itself* has to re-evaluate what they know about the others. In a 'society of strangers' this does not cause much problem – unless, as in *None*, the characters' individual survival depends on correctly identifying the guilty party – but in a family or a group of friends or colleagues, doubt is deeply corrosive to the group unity and to each character's interpersonal relationships. This problem is explicitly raised in *Sparkling Cyanide*: "You didn't think about your mother or your father or your sister or your aunt. They just existed, unquestioned, in those relationships. You didn't think about them as *people*. You didn't ask yourself, even, what they were *like*" (Christie 2002c, 8). The character subject to this sudden realisation calls it a "shock" (*ibid.*):

⁵¹ It is interesting to notice that this Chamber of Horrors historically showcased French famous figures of the French Revolution: Cavendish's observation gives the reader a sense that the closed circle troubles the social order itself. See 3.3.2.

what is at stake here, truly, is the capability of knowing people. The fundamental question could be summed up as, ‘Do you really know the ones you love?’ This question is at the centre of *Ordeal by Innocence*, a novel in which the ideal scapegoat is revealed to be innocent:

‘The family would come under suspicion,’ he said, ‘and it might remain under suspicion for a long time – perhaps for ever. If one of the family was guilty it is possible that they themselves would not know which one. They would look at each other and – wonder... Yes, that’s what would be the worst of all. They themselves would not know *which*... [...] Yes, that’s terrible... To go on year after year not knowing, looking at one another, perhaps the suspicion affecting one’s relationships with people. Destroying love, destroying trust...’ (Christie 2003c, 69)

This constant suspicion is fundamentally destructive, as acknowledged in this quotation. The use of the word ‘trust’ in particular is remarkable, for it pinpoints exactly the general atmosphere of Christie’s closed circle novels as soon as the murder is committed. The enclosed group’s relationships become imbued with distrust, a distrust which, as the quote notices, is mainly revealed by the problem of optics I have already analysed: in their quests to find the truth about the murderer, but also about their closed ones, the characters keep *looking* at each other and wondering, seeing each other from a different and unflattering perspective. They see their fellowmen from a new angle. In *Mesopotamia* for instance, Amy Leatheran comes to see each character in a new light during the investigation: the spiteful Mrs Mercado appears like a frightened woman, while the timid Mr Mercado is revealed to be a drug addict, and the nervous and somber Mr Carey is revealed to both hate and love the victim. Simple suspicion may also make people see the characters differently on the basis of a potentiality: Amy thus tries to look for the traits of a known enemy of Mrs Leidner’s on the face on the young Carl Reiter. The effect is similar to that of an optical illusion: “[...] *il est impossible de voir les deux formes simultanément*. Le cerveau identifie une première image [...] et l’autre, pendant ce temps, plonge dans l’invisibilité” (Bayard 2019, 109). Each character’s personal duplicity thus turns against him or her, as the mask supposed to protect him/her from the public eye makes him/her the very object of it and makes them look suspicious. In turn, the characters’ suspicion grows on sheer paranoia.

This paranoia is worsened by the fact that all the characters are aware that their repressed desire to kill is shared by the other characters; in other words, each character is capable of perceiving and understanding the others’ motives to get rid of the victim precisely because he or she shares that desire as well. As I have mentioned at the end of 3.1.2., this revelation is uncomfortable, for each character can perceive his darkest desires in the others; to quote

Freud, each of them is aware of "... the workings of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-men, but at the same time he is dimly aware of them in remote corners of his own being" (Freud 1955, 243). While this awareness feeds each character's suspicions, it also participates to the uncanny feeling associated with this situation: this desire reveals their hidden resemblance behind their individual personalities, in the sense that this common wish de-personalizes the characters and makes them similar (hence both familiar and unknown to themselves). This dimension of suspicion is mostly implicit in Christie's novels: the characters express sympathy for a potential murderer (Hastings confesses that he would not blame Colonel Luttrell for killing his wife in *Curtain*, for instance) or are instantly capable of seeing why a character could have committed the murder. This uncomfortable truth, however, is acknowledged most explicitly in *None*. The reader follows the point of view of many characters, among them (and most prominently) Vera Claythorne. Like all the members of the circle in this novel, Vera is guilty of murder: she killed Cyril, the child she was governess to, by voluntarily letting him drown. Throughout the novel, Vera grows extremely wary of each and every other member of the group as she gains knowledge of the murders they committed. More exactly, she suspects them because *she recognises her own darkness in them*. For instance, she grows wary of Emily Brent after discovering that she fired her pregnant maid and led her to commit suicide by drowning: "Every time Vera thought of [Emily Brent] she seemed to see a pale drowned face with seaweed entangled in the hair... A face that had once been pretty – impudently pretty perhaps – and which was now beyond the reach of pity or terror" (Christie 2011, 127). Emily is a mirror image of Vera, because their murders are similar: both murders involve an innocent, a child, an indirect encouragement to die, and drowning. As a result of these resemblances, Vera sees herself in Emily and mixes up their experiences: Vera pictures "seaweed" in the drowned maid's hair – the maid could not have had them, since she drowned in a river, but Cyril, who drowned at sea, certainly had. Because Vera recognises herself in another figure, she acknowledges that Emily – like herself – is completely capable of committing murder, and this arouses Vera's horror, disgust, and fear. Likewise, Vera is capable of imagining exactly what a murderer would do ("If she were Armstrong intent on murder, it was cunning that she would employ, not force," *ibid.*, 239). The most telling example, however, would be Lombard's. At the start of the novel, Vera is immediately attracted to Lombard: she sees his "arrogant, almost cruel mouth" (*ibid.*, 5) and yet feels attraction towards him. While she is horrified to learn that he abandoned the African natives he was responsible for to their deaths – a crime that resembles her own –, she also justifies his crime by asserting that "they were only natives" (*ibid.*, 109) in the same way that

she justifies her own (“Cyril wasn’t really strong. A puny child – no stamina. The kind of child, perhaps, who wouldn’t live to grow up...,” *ibid.*, 88): by thinking that the victims were less valuable or unfit to live in some way. Vera thus identifies with Lombard to some extent, but in the end, what she initially liked in him (his cruelty, so similar to her own coldness and ruthlessness) is what convinces her that he must be the culprit. Vera’s example (which is but an extreme example of what Christie’s characters feel in her novels) shows that the experience of alterity in Christie’s closed circles is fundamentally rooted in terror – terror of others, but also terror of the self: evil is ‘among us’ because it is, first and foremost, within oneself. This absolute terror of others and its workings are best illustrated by the excerpt from *None* that can be found in Annex A. The terror felt by the characters is intrinsically connected to the certainty that the murderer is “one of us”: the chapter opens on those words and proceeds to describe their effects on the characters. This phrase – repeated and italicised, a double emphasis that is as striking at its position – has a hypnotic effect: it is noticed that the characters’ brains are “receptive,” meaning that they are particularly suggestible. This in keeping with the fact that the characters are losing touch with their rational side: they are characterised, throughout this extract (and the rest of the novel) by their nervous and crazed behaviour. Their thoughts are indeed “abnormal, feverish, diseased” and show their paranoia: the frantic repetition of a mantra to keep rational, the delusion that Armstrong must be a fake doctor and is watching the thinker, and the delirious evocation of Judgment Day, nightmare and reality are very telling of the characters’ terror. This loss of rationality also corresponds to a regression to an animal state, that reveals their true nature – the primitive, shameful part of one’s psyche that all of them tried to hide (more or less successfully) behind a social mask. The aggressive Lombard (who never quite hid who he really was) looks like a predator: his step is “quicker,” his body is “lithe” and his teeth are “long” and “white” – everything in Lombard evokes a tiger, from his feline gait to his smile. Vera Claythorne, on the other hand, is described as “a bird,” small and frightened – until fear turns the cornered animal into a predator and she murders Lombard. Blore’s “look of mingled ferocity and stupidity,” too, reveals that he is a cornered animal with nothing left to lose but little survival skills, which foreshadows his eventual death. This regression into an animal state goes along with the deliquescence of the group: as is mentioned early on in the extract, the characters no longer try to keep up the charade of civility. Suspicion destroys the very fabric of society and makes cohesion and cooperation strictly impossible. This blurring of boundaries between animal and human (or between the uncivilised self and the social self) can be related, once again, to the Uncanny, the revelation of a hidden dimension in once familiar beings. This regression also

finalises the representation of the enclosed setting as the place where the unconscious dimension is prevalent: the most uncivilised aspects of one's self win over the more social aspects of the enclosed group under extreme pressure.

As shown above, suspicion works the group's destruction by means of the eye. The sense of watching and being watched permeates the text: their situation as enemies is clearly related to their watching one another. In addition, one's watching another is seen as suspicious – we find here “the dread of the evil eye” held by Freud as uncanny: “What is feared is thus a secret intention of doing harm, and certain signs are taken to mean that that intention has the necessary power at its command” (Freud 1955, 240). The closed circle is a vicious circle: watching is necessary to find the culprit, but watching only provokes more distrust. The effect produced is similar to that of the Panopticon, a theoretical prison system invented by Jeremy Bentham. Foucault sums up the concept of the Panopticon in *Surveiller et punir*: it consists in locating prisoners in a ring-shaped building where each cell possesses two windows letting the light in, while watchers have placed themselves in a tower at the centre of the ring shape. From this tower, one can see everything that is going on in every single cell, making each prisoner both “completely individualised and constantly visible” (Foucault 1975, 201-2, translation mine). Simply put, the idea is that constant surveillance would prevent prisoners from misbehaving. This optical system is based on absolute visibility and more precisely on the *prohibitive* nature of the social gaze:

De là, l'effet majeur du Panoptique : induire chez le détenu un état conscient et permanent de visibilité qui assure le fonctionnement automatique du pouvoir. Faire que la surveillance soit permanente dans ses effets, même si elle est discontinuée dans son action; [...] que cet appareil architectural soit une machine à créer et à soutenir un rapport de pouvoir indépendant de celui qui l'exerce; bref que les détenus soient pris dans une situation de pouvoir dont ils sont eux-mêmes les porteurs. [...] Pour cela Bentham a posé le principe que le pouvoir devait être visible et invérifiable. Visible : sans cesse le détenu aura devant les yeux la haute silhouette de la tour centrale d'où il est épié. Invérifiable : le détenu ne doit jamais savoir s'il est actuellement regardé; mais il doit être sûr qu'il peut toujours l'être. (Foucault 1975, 202-3)

We find in Christie's closed circle mysteries the tremendous power of the social gaze that Foucault describes here. The characters form a social circle if not a physical one (although, since they are watching each other, we may suppose they are sitting in a circle), mirroring the physical disposition of the Panopticon. While they are not watched by an external power, each character is watching and being watched at the same time, uncomfortably blurring the lines between prisoners and gaolers (once again an uncanny feeling): in Annex A, for instance, the first character is hyperaware of and paralyzed by Armstrong's eyes on him/her *and* observing

Armstrong at the same time, in an attempt to confirm that he is the culprit but also to prevent him from doing anything. It is worth noticing, however, that there is no textual confirmation that Armstrong is indeed watching the character in question; it might be a paranoid delusion. As in the Panopticon, the omnipresent social gaze is a double-edged tool: it is supposed to give complete knowledge about the prisoners (and thus, to reveal who the murderer is) while the knowledge of being watched (for real or not) is a deterrent that prevents the criminals from committing crime or misbehaving (even though it also restrains the innocent characters' freedom, as exemplified by the complete inactivity of the characters in the excerpt). This weight of the social gaze is a direct reaction to the characters' initial inattention when the murder is committed. The murderer's mission, indeed, is always to evade the social gaze, in a manner that is not unlike an illusionist's: he/she either chooses to kill in a place where people cannot see (the locked room, for instance, and often at night) or at a "psychological" moment of inattention where people's gazes are focused elsewhere – Wargrave killed Marston publicly in such a way at the very start of the novel. The characters' reaction to their blindness is to start watching more intensely than ever, whereas the characters are rarely shown to be watching each other prior to the murder – unless they are wary of each other because of the circumstances, as in *None*, or are suspicious of a character's behaviour in particular, like Alfred Inglethorp in *Styles*.

Ironically, their reaction to understanding that their social system has failed is to implement an even more oppressive one. In that light, one may see the closed circle as a criticism of social hypocrisy: if the characters were not watched, and if the extreme act of murder had not revealed a problem, the characters' moral ambivalence would remain unexposed, denied or glossed over. For instance, that the first death of *None* – Marston's – occurs in public is very significant, because it explicitly shows the failure of society: people *do not* see the murders committed in front of their own eyes. In *None*, this failure is generalised: it is not simply that the people on Soldier Island did not see Wargrave murder Marston, but that society *in general* has either not seen or turned a blind eye to the murders each of the characters committed, even though they were blatant.

While this concept is twisted in Christie's closed circles, for visibility and accrued observation only create endless suspicion and since people are not judged for what they *have* done but in the light of what they *might* have done, this evocation of the Panopticon is suggestive: it reveals that the closed circle is in fact a prison, where the legally prohibitive gaze becomes a morally judgmental and condemning one. This fact is implicitly acknowledged by Poirot when he declares in *Mesopotamia*: "*In a house where murder has*

been committed, every inmate comes in for a certain share of suspicion” (Christie 2001b, 128; emphasis in the original). The use of the word “inmate” is revealing: while on a surface level it simply refers to the inhabitants of the house or setting, the word also designates people confined in a prison. This is the final inversion of the enclosed setting: just as the locked and isolated setting turns into a prison (see 2.3.2.), the social group that was seen as a social ideal turns into a prison too. The characters are prisoners of the trauma of uncertainty, trapped in the others’ perpetual gaze and judgement in a fashion that reminds one of Jean-Paul Sartre’s *No Exit* (a play which, as we have seen, is itself a closed circle; see 2.2.1.): the real torture, he posits, is to be watched and judged by the Others. The image of the circle becomes dual as well: while it refers to the fact that each character looks equally guilty, it comes to evoke the idea of *being surrounded*, watched and potentially threatened from all sides (Mijolla-Mellor 2006, 87-8). As social encircling becomes suffocating, the paranoia of the closed circle creates a sense of psychological claustrophobia that the characters cannot escape.

3.3. ‘Suspect everyone’: the paradoxes of a genre based on suspicion

3.3.1. “Looking and wondering, ‘is it you?’”⁵²: paranoia as a game

As it was explained in my previous part, the closed circle mystery as a subgenre relies entirely on the inability to identify the murderer. The problem is not that there is no suspect and that the crime seems to have no solution; on the contrary, the issue is that *too many* solutions arise and seem likely, making suspicion endless. This creates a sense of fear and terror that is different from Christie’s predecessors: in Poe’s stories for instance, the terror arises from the confrontation with the shadowy parts of one’s self, while in Carr’s it stems from the sheer impossibility of the events that cannot be reconciled with a normal understanding of the world. In Christie’s, while she uses these techniques as well, the uneasiness comes from the fact that there are too many potentialities; it is, in fact, a *social* uneasiness. This suspicion results in endless paranoia on the part of the characters, but also on the part of the readers.

One will remember, indeed, that the closed circle ploy was created because an equal focus on several characters simultaneously was supposed to ensure fair play with the reader, that is to say that the closed circle was meant to create the deductive challenge that is the *raison*

⁵² Quote taken from *Hickory Dickory Death* (Christie 1956, 180)

d'être of the genre during the Golden Age (see 1.4.1.). This dimension of the detective genre and especially of the closed circle mystery as a game is even acknowledged by Christie herself in the novel *Dumb Witness*, which presents the most classic combination of the closed circle formula:

'You know, Poirot, that's the worst of this game of ours. Every single little thing that anyone does is open to the most sinister constructions.'

'It is true that I myself have enjoined upon you the motto, "suspect everyone."' (Christie 2002b, 300)

Christie herself thus acknowledges the purpose of the closed circle subgenre: every character *must* be suspected, something that Bargainnier mentions as one of the primary rules of Golden Age detective fiction (Bargainnier 1980, 17). However, she also acknowledges the paradox that this creates: on the one hand, this suspicion is a nightmare for the characters, but it is also a *game* for the detective and the reader (which, we remember, are on equal footing in this configuration – see 2.1.1.). This game, tortuous as it is for the characters, is the main reason for the readers' attraction to and enjoyment of the genre and most especially of this particular subset of detective fiction. To some extent, one may suggest that the genre is based on an enjoyment of transgression, framed by the certainty of retribution – this certainty being what makes it a game.

In this sense, the closed circle mystery can be read as a literature of paranoia, not only because it depicts the characters' actual paranoia, but also because it relies on a form of paranoia on the *readers'* part as well. In her psychoanalytical reading of Christie's novels, Sophie de Mijolla-Mellor analyses some of the reasons why readers enjoy Christie's mysteries so much: she notably mentions the aesthetic and intellectual pleasure to be found in reading Christie's puzzles (Mijolla-Mellor 2006, 91) and the pleasure of not knowing what is going on ("le plaisir du non-su," *ibid.*, 161) – something which Gonon sums up as "curiosity," as opposed to suspense which is the province of the thriller (Gonon 2021, 36). However, Mijolla-Mellor does also mention that these two pleasures – the intellectual enjoyment of an enigma and the satisfaction of being kept on tenterhooks – are intrinsically connected to the reader's endless suspicion and paranoia towards each and every character: the impossibility to feel safe in a paranoid situation where everyone might just be a murderer – and the inherent risk this situation represents – is on par with the excitement provoked by the mystery (Mijolla-Mellor 2006., 19). According to Mijolla-Mellor, this situation of generalised doubt on the reader's part (in which, she theorises, the reader may come to feel like the mystery is but a gigantic conspiracy and that he/she is the only one kept in the dark – something which does happen in *Orient Express*) is similar to a delusion or delirium (*ibid.*, 97). If we accept

Mijolla-Mellor's statement as true, then Christie's novels play with two different types of paranoia and delusion: the first one plagues the characters, the other one affects the reader.

While it would be an exaggeration to state that Christie's characters and readers suffer from actual (i.e. clinical) delusion and/or paranoia, they nevertheless display several traits associated with such pathologies. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* defines delusions as

fixed beliefs that are not amenable to change in light of conflicting evidence. [...] The distinction between a delusion and a strongly held idea is sometimes difficult to make and depends in part on the degree of conviction with which the belief is held despite clear or reasonable contradictory evidence regarding its veracity. (American Psychiatric Association 2013, 87)

The *Manual* similarly defines Paranoid Personality Disorder as “a pervasive distrust and suspiciousness of other such that their motives are interpreted as malevolent”; the patient for instance “[s]uspects, without sufficient basis, that others are exploiting, harming, or deceiving him or her”, “[i]s preoccupied with unjustified doubts about the loyalty or trustworthiness of friends or associates,” “is reluctant to confide in others because of unwarranted fear that the information will be used maliciously against him or her,” “[r]eads hidden demeaning or threatening meanings into benign remarks or events” and “[h]as recurrent suspicions, without justification” (most notably about the fidelity of a partner, although not exclusively) (*ibid.*, 649). In his analysis of Christie's *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (a closed circle mystery as well) psychoanalyst and literary scholar Pierre Bayard analyses paranoid delusion and its relation to detective fiction – and argues, albeit humorously, that Poirot's unshakeable belief in the solutions he suggests is akin to a bout of paranoid delusion. He remarks that, according to Freud, delusion is not actually a sign of clinical madness but the exact opposite, an attempt to put some sense and order into madness in order to heal from it (“*une tentative pour mettre de l'ordre dans la folie, [...] un essai de guérison,*” Bayard 2008, 129). This definition is similar to the premise of the closed circle: in this comparison, the murder is a symptom of a deep social trouble that went undiagnosed and unhealed for too long, while the mystery surrounding the murder is the madness that must be made sense of. In this sense, suspecting – even if one's suspicions are disorganised and seem to make little sense – is an attempt to solve the problem, even incorrectly. That one's reasoning is disorganised and nonsensical is another feature of the paranoid delusion: Bayard adds that such a delusion entertains a “falsified relationship to reality” (*ibid.*, 115, translation mine): it involves distorting reality in order to fit one's hypotheses, especially since the paranoid delusion often involves interpersonal relationships (*ibid.*, 116-7). Indeed, the paranoid delusion is a product of the

unconscious (*ibid.*, 122): the delusion is born out of one's deepest desires or fears – such as the desire to reject guilt on an outsider, or the fear of this very same outsider, in the characters' case.

All the characteristics of paranoia, delusion, and paranoid delusion can indeed be observed in Christie's characters. In *Styles*, Alfred Inglethorp is the ideal scapegoat for the entire Cavendish family and even for the narrator himself. Throughout the novel, Inglethorp is constantly berated even before the murder is committed: he is a *parvenu* who married a rich woman and has control over her, and he looks "alien" and "out of place" with his long black beard and unusual appearance (*ibid.*, 17) which is described as a "gipsy face" (*ibid.*, 128). Hastings mentions that Inglethorp could not "be unaware" that he was being suspected: "the suspicion in the atmosphere must warn him that he was already a marked man," Hastings comments (Christie 2007, 92). Inglethorp is 'marked' not because there is undeniable evidence against him, but out of social and racial prejudice and personal resentment. This prejudice leads the characters of the novel to do complex mental gymnastics in order to fit their wish-fulfilling delusion that the murderer cannot *truly* be one of them and must thus be the ill-integrated, already-hated Inglethorp with reality. True to Bayard's definition of the paranoid delusion, the characters find reasons and clues that tend to prove this hypothesis true, even if it means discarding other valuable hypotheses (such as one of the Cavendish sons being guilty), distorting the meaning of a clue (the meaning of the broken coffee cup changes according to a character's current hypothesis), or ignoring a proved fact altogether (that someone *was* in the victim's room during the murder and it could not be Inglethorp). A similar pattern is observed in *Christmas* for instance, in which Magdalene easily suspects Pilar Estravados, the estranged Spanish relative no one knows, even though Pilar's best interests seemed to rely on Simeon's remaining alive (Christie 2001a, 203), or in *Curtain*, in which Hastings decides that the murderer must be Allerton because Allerton, a known philanderer, displays a sexual interest in Hastings' daughter Judith. The reverse is also possible: a character may be steadfast in his/her certainty that a character cannot possibly be guilty. In *None*, Colonel Macarthur is thus convinced that Emily Blunt cannot be the murderer, because she is old, extremely pious, and is the niece of a brother in arms from a respectable family (Christie 2011, 85).

In some cases, it is what the characters know or think they know about each other that leads them to false conclusions. In *Styles*, for example, Lawrence Cavendish is convinced that Cynthia Murdoch is the murderer because he knows that the door between her room and the victim's was actually open; in *Christmas*, the intimate knowledge that each member of the

family has reasons to hate Simeon and to benefit from his death prompts them to suspect each other. In the latter case, it is striking that – contrary to the examples cited above – the characters cannot set their minds on one suspect in particular and instead suspect every character at the same time. This tendency is particularly striking in *None*, in which all the characters suspect each other in turn. The example of Blore, in particular, is rather telling. Because of the murderer's recording that reveal each characters' crimes (and the characters' own admission to the truth of it), Blore grows convinced that Armstrong, who killed a patient once, is the one who overdosed Mrs Rogers, before suspecting Lombard, the only one among them who killed several people, a few paragraphs after that (Christie 2011, 140-1), and eventually deciding – out of religious prejudice and spite for figures of moral authority rather than out of logic – that Emily Brent must be the murderer (*ibid.*, 188-9). In this case, Blore interprets Armstrong's, Lombard's, or Emily's words, behaviour, and actions as a sign of hostility and guilt: Armstrong's handling of Mrs Rogers *must* necessarily be ill-inspired, Lombard's doubts about Blore's motives and identity (since Blore lied about both) *must* be an attempt to redirect the other characters' suspicions on someone else, Emily's reading her Bible *must* be a clue that her (alleged) murder spree is a twisted act of zealous bigotry. These interpretations of the situation, however, are mutually exclusive. This shows that the novel aims at pinpointing how easily circumstances can be misinterpreted but also how difficult it is to reach any truthful explanation – which, in turn, creates the general state of doubt that pervades the genre.

However, as mentioned above, this constant paranoia (the irrationality of which is made evident by the strange mix between logic and personal prejudice that Blore displays) is also part of the reader's experience while reading one of Christie's closed circles. Like the characters, the reader is either indecisive – switching back and forth between several suspects and multiple explanations at once, like Blore – or set on one suspect in particular (like Hastings), which means invalidating the other clues and theories that Christie is very careful to plant. Indeed, as Bayard explains, the detective writer makes sure to create a wide array of potential meanings during the first part of the novel, in order to create multiple and conflicting theories and solutions to the mystery:

Le roman policier d'énigme ne fonctionne pas [...] comme une totalité close, mais selon deux mouvements successifs. Le premier d'entre eux, qui dure la plus grande partie du livre, est un mouvement d'*ouverture du sens* qui tend à multiplier les pistes et les solutions. Sans explorer, et de loin, toutes les possibilités combinatoires, ce mouvement développe les propositions explicites ainsi que les suggestions plus discrètes, faisant apparaître sous les yeux du lecteur, pendant de brefs moments, une multitude de mondes

possibles, où des assassins différents commettent des meurtres virtuels. (Bayard 2008, 94-5)

Christie's aim is to create mysteries that *seem* to have many possible solutions, even though none of them seems to completely explain the mystery in its entirety – for instance, the solution to *Styles* can be deduced only by correctly identifying Inglethorp and Evie's relationship, the *modus operandi* and its failure, the character who was in Emily's room, and the meaning of Emily's conflicting actions on the day of her death. Throughout the novel, all these elements, taken separately, *seem* to suggest different things or to point to a different culprit. For the duration of the novel, the reader is thus confronted to a situation in which no single theory makes complete sense and all his/her theories (whether based on logic or bias against a character) have to coexist – until the very last chapter when the detective unveils the truth and puts forward a single explanation for all to accept. While reading, the reader must thus keep in mind all the theories – either spelled out explicitly by the author or merely implied – and can never know whether he/she is has found the truth or has fallen for a red herring.

This is even truer of the closed circle, because Christie goes to great lengths to ensure that each character is extremely suspicious – that, as mentioned above, all characters look equally *suspicious*. In other words, and as a character in *None* declares: “Then we are agreed. There can be no elimination on the ground of character or position alone.” (Christie 2011, 154). This means, first, that Christie is very careful in the way she distributes the three main components of (apparent) guilt between the characters, i.e. motive, means, and opportunity. Motive is established easily enough in the first pages of each novel: each novel dedicates some time to show that the victim is a monster one would be glad to get rid of, but also to show the various conflicts between each character and the victim (3.1. and 3.2. already expand quite extensively on that point). In addition to motive, means is to be considered. Murders that make use of physical violence usually reveal very little about their murderer – in *Mesopotamia*, for instance, it is mentioned that the murder, however violent, might have been committed by a woman as well as by a man. Poisoning, however, opens an array of possibilities. In *None*, as shown above, that Dr Armstrong is a doctor is a solid argument against him given that Marston and Mrs Rogers were poisoned. In *Styles*, Cynthia looks just as suspicious given that the poison used was strychnine and Cynthia works in a dispensary. However, in the novel, several characters do visit Cynthia's dispensary before the murder, and an offhand comment from Cynthia highlights that Lawrence in particular spent time near the poison cupboard: “If you people only knew how fatally easy it is to poison someone by

mistake, you wouldn't joke about it. [...] We've got all sorts of secret stories in that cupboard. No, Lawrence – that's the poison cupboard. The big cupboard – that's right" (Christie 2007, 32). This comment is not mentioned again during the course of the novel – but it is enough for the reader to start suspecting Lawrence, all the more so as Lawrence *does* hide a secret and thus acts suspiciously.⁵³ Opportunity is also an important point for the reader to consider. In *Christmas* for instance the alibis (or lack thereof) of every character are capital, and Poirot destroys each and every of them throughout the novel. David was supposedly playing the piano – but while the music was heard, David himself was not seen playing it. Could someone have taken his place? George and Magdalene both claim that they were on the telephone at the same time, which is impossible – which of them is lying? Are they both lying? If so, are they guilty or do they simply try to protect themselves in case the police suspects them? Were Lydia and Hilda really with their husbands? Where were Pilar and Stephen? Harry and Alfred would not give one another an alibi – or would they?

In addition to motive, means and opportunity, various elements in the characters' behaviours add to suspicion. As Annie Combes notices, each sentence uttered by the characters must be ambiguous or incomplete in some way – every sentence must suggest innocence and guilt at the same time (Combes 1989, 94-5); similarly, each character's actions must simultaneously have a completely innocuous explanation or a damning one. The epitome of ambiguity in the characters' sentences and behaviour can be found in the excerpt of *None* in Annex A: Christie jumps from point of view to point of view, and each foray into the characters' consciousness is vague enough so as not to reveal which thoughts belong to which character – and none of these thoughts reveal which one of the five characters is the murderer exactly. The reader has to try and assign each thought to a character and decide which thought *seems* to be an indicator of guilt – could it be the one thinking about death, or the one trying to keep sane? If so, why is the murderer thinking about these things – what does it say about the murderer? Similarly, the characters' external display of terror or confidence may be honest or it may be a lie, it may reveal guilt or it might not. It is this ambiguity in the narrative – which is a necessary component to preserve suspense – that makes the various competing interpretations of the mystery possible.

A character's behaviour, past, competence at his/her job, appearance, etc., may also be an indirect clue or red herring. In *Christmas*, for instance, the physical resemblance between

⁵³ This paranoia also prevents any lifelike effect ("effet de réel" in Barthes's phrase, see 2.2.3.); no single element is here merely to give lifelikeness to the diegesis but as a potential clue to a character's guilt...

Simeon Lee, Harry Lee, and Stephen Farr – as well as Simeon Lee’s philandering ways, and Stephen Farr’s sudden fright at discovering that Pilar, who he is attracted to, is Simeon’s granddaughter – is emphasised often enough to lead the reader to (correctly) suspect that Stephen Farr is *not* the son of an old friend of Simeon’s but Simeon’s own son. Another example would be Father Lavigny in *Mesopotamia*:

‘He may be a very fine epigraphist but he’s a remarkably lazy one. He spends all his afternoons sleeping.’ [...] ‘This man strikes me as slightly unorthodox – though, of course, I’m not competent to judge. But one or two of his translations have been surprising, to say the least of it. I can hardly believe, for instance, that he’s right about that inscribed brick, and yet he must know.’ (Christie 2001b, 76)

This declaration is enough for the reader to be suspicious of Father Lavigny. Could he not be an actual epigraphist? His apparent laziness as well as Dr Leidner’s bad opinion on him – i.e. an expert’s puzzlement and disapproval about Lavigny’s work – tend to suggest that there is something off with Lavigny. The reader thus wonders: if Father Lavigny was a fraud – might it be a motive for murder, if Louise Leidner found out? Does anything indicate that she did?

Finally, clues are just as ambiguous as the characters themselves: while some clues reveal something about the *modus operandi* or the victim or simply complicate the mystery, some other clues may make a character in particular very suspicious-looking. This is particularly emphasised in *Orient Express* (purposefully): the pipe cleaner found in the victim’s berth tends to designate Colonel Arbuthnot as a suspect, the handkerchief embroidered with the letter H may point at any woman with a name starting with an H (Hildegarde Schmidt? Helena Andrenyi – unless she is actually *Elena* Andrenyi? Natalia Dragomiroff, whose initial is H in Russian?). The real question, however, is to know whether or not these clues are real or if they were planted by the actual murderer – if so, this might innocent the accused.

As Pierre Bayard explains, this multiplicity of readings that create paranoia and uncertainty on the reader’s part comes from the writer’s desire to suggest multiple theories and to dissimulate the truth at the same time. Bayard underlines that *everything* can be interpreted in a literary text – *a fortiori* in a detective story which inherently aims to dissimulate the truth and yet to create multiple readings and interpretations at the same time (Bayard 2008, 96-7). The aim is to prevent the reader from seeing the mystery and the clues correctly and thus to create bias on the reader’s end⁵⁴. In other words, every single element in Christie’s closed circles is *polysemic* – to the point, Bayard explains, that there exists a possibly unlimited

⁵⁴ See Bayard 2008, 41-51, and Combes 1989, 229-45, for a detailed analysis of the various kinds of red herrings, dissimulation strategies, and clues Christie uses in her novels. Most of them consist in influencing the reader’s way of seeing the mystery or hiding the truth – a trick that is reminiscent of the issue of optics mentioned in 3.2.

number of readings of the text, and that each reader (with his/her own personal biases, preferences, and interpretations) reads a different text (*ibid.*, 50-1, 97). A paradigm of polysemy is found in *Styles*, in which Emily Inglethorp makes two different declarations before her death, the first to a man and the second later on to her confidante:

‘You have lied to me, and deceived me,’ she said. [...] ‘How dare you? I have kept you and clothed you and fed you! You owe everything to me! And this is how you repay me! By bringing disgrace upon our name! [...] Nothing that you can say will make any difference. I see my duty clearly. My mind is made up. You need not think that any fear of publicity, or scandal between husband and wife will deter me.’ (Christie 2007, 72-3)

She whispered to herself, as though she had forgotten I was there: ‘These few words—and everything’s changed.’ And then she says to me: ‘Never trust a man, Dorcas, they’re not worth it! [...] I don’t know what to do,’ she says. ‘Scandal between husband and wife is a dreadful thing, Dorcas. I’d rather hush it up if I could.’ (*ibid.*, 73-4)

These two excerpts are a prime example of polysemy, for their meaning is endlessly ambiguous. The scandal between husband and wife that Emily Inglethorp keeps on mentioning may refer to her own marriage with Alfred, or to John and Mary’s marriage. That the man in question owes everything to Emily may point to Alfred the *parvenu* or to John the step-son, while the reference to “our name” may indicate a dynastic intent that would fit her relationship with John slightly better, and the bitterness towards men seems more telling of a romantic disappointment. The reader has to wonder which man Emily is talking about, and how to interpret her different behaviour in the two scenes – is she trying to be strong in front of the man by pretending scandal does not affect her and then collapses in front of Dorcas the loyal servant, or is Emily talking of *two* different scandals? As Combes remarks, the detectives and readers are semiologists who do their best to interpret not only the characters’ words and behaviours (Combes 1989, 114) but also the *author’s* words and strategies.

Indeed, the reader must also decide on what strategy Christie is likely to have adopted while writing the novel he/she is currently reading. Good knowledge of Christie’s usual tricks may help the reader – but it may also confuse him/her. In *Styles*, that Inglethorp looks almost *too* guilty means that the reader is likely to overlook him as a potential suspect – it would be too easy a solution. Christie uses this misconception against the reader: Inglethorp is actually the culprit. In later novels, no character can thus be discarded: the least-guilty looking and the most-guilty-looking are just as suspect as the rest. When Hastings suspects Allerton in *Curtain*, it might mean that Allerton is innocent since Christie would not pull the same trick twice – or would she? Could Christie’s previous use of the trick mean that the reader would

not suspect it could work a second time, and thus could Christie have chosen to do it?⁵⁵ The characters' prejudices against Inglethorp turned out to be true; does similar prejudice against Pilar Estravados mean that she cannot be guilty, or that she could? Even the characters' own suspicions may be either a clue or a red herring. As Combes notices, the characters' suspicions only worsen the reader's confusion and uncertainty (Combes 1989, 115).

In conclusion, Christie's strategy consists in a clever division of suspicious elements between the characters: each character is given a specific combination of dubious circumstances and alarming behaviour so that each and every member of the closed circle looks like a plausible culprit to the reader. Christie's purpose throughout each mystery is to create open meanings – and thus uncertainty – so that all the possible solutions appear equally likely; it is only by establishing such an equality between the characters that the game between reader and writer can be played, meaning that the reader – contrary to the characters – *enjoys* the paranoia such a game entails. Nevertheless, this murderous potential that seems to be found in equal parts in *every* character is disquieting. Can order really be restored at the end of the story when the whole novel has proved that everyone is a potential murderer?

3.3.2. An impossible catharsis? The universality of guilt and its issues in Agatha Christie's closed circle mysteries

As it was mentioned above, 'classical' (i.e. Golden Age) detective fiction and especially the closed circle mystery relies entirely on a two-fold process: the first part of the novel aims at *widening* the range of possibilities, while the last few chapters – i.e. the resolution – aim at definitively restricting the various potentialities that the novel has created and suggested to a single solution that explains the mystery in its entirety (Bayard 2008, 95). This resolution means a return to order for the characters, especially in the closed circle of suspects: the painful process of suspecting every single loved one and seeing evil everywhere can finally come to an end as evil is revealed to be the exclusive domain of one (or two) character only. This character can be rejected from the group and punished (i.e. the murderer may die or be sentenced in court, which in Christie's time usually means death by hanging; since the character disappears from the group and the story altogether, his/her sentence is also akin to social and narrative death), while the innocent characters can return to their initial state of "an

⁵⁵ This kind of intertextual guessing is also pointing to the fictitiousness of the genre, since here it refers not to the realistic quality of the explanation but to its relation to others of Christie's *fictions*.

innocent society in a state of grace, *i.e.*, a society where there is no need of the law, no contradiction between the aesthetic individual and the ethical universal” (Auden 1974, 403) – although, as I will show below, this view is over-optimistic. The “fallen” member of the group removed, the group may become the “Eden-like” “Great Good Place” it used to be (*ibid.*, 402-3). In that sense, the dénouement of the detective story is usually comedic: in *Christmas* for instance, Pilar and Stephen marry, Lydia and Alfred find marital happiness at last, and the brothers who were in bad terms find some sort of reconciliation. This promise of happiness and freedom is there again compared to Eden by Lydia Lee, whose new diorama (which we remember represents Lydia’s feelings towards her imprisonment in the family house) is called “an attempt at the Garden of Eden. A new version – without any serpent – and Adam and Eve are definitely middle-aged” (Christie 2001a, 334).

The religious vocabulary is a constant in Christie’s closed circles: one remembers that the murderer is often demonised and called a “devil” while seeming granted supernatural powers (see 3.2.). In addition, the imagery of the closed circle itself evokes Christian scenes. As mentioned in 1.3.1., the circle is most often associated with the imagery of the characters gathering around a table, which is supposed to highlight their equality as suspects. This imagery is eerily reminiscent of Christ’s Last Meal in the Bible:

Now when even was come, he was sitting at meat with the twelve disciples;
and as they were eating, he said, Verily I say unto you, that one of you shall betray me.
And they were exceeding sorrowful, and began to say unto him every one, Is it I, Lord?
And he answered and said, He that dipped his hand with me in the dish, the same shall
betray me. (Matthew 26:24-25)

And they began to question among themselves, which of them it was that should do this
thing.
And there arose also a contention among them, which of them was accounted to be
greatest. (Luke 22:23-24)

Christie’s closed circle stories use the same pattern as in this Biblical scene: the culprit is always one of the victim’s most trusted, one the victim shares meals with; he/she always betrays the victim, leaving the other members of the group to debate which one(s) of them are beyond suspicion or, on the contrary, the most likely culprit. Later on, Judas’ corruption is metaphorically assimilated to a possession by the devil: “then entered Satan into him [Judas]” (John 13:37) – the same devil that Christie’s characters accuse of possessing the murderer.

In that light, the murderer's eviction from a group is akin to an exorcism of sorts, by which all traces of evil are believed to be removed from the group at large. This exorcism of guilt is akin to the process of catharsis as defined by Aristotle⁵⁶:

The effect of 'purgation' or 'purification' achieved by tragic drama, [...] arousing pity and fear in such a way as to accomplish a catharsis of such emotions [...]. [Aristotle's] metaphor of emotional cleansing has been read as a solution to the puzzle of audiences' pleasure or relief in witnessing the disturbing events enacted in tragedies. Another interpretation is that it is the protagonist's guilt that is purged, rather than the audience's feeling of terror. (Baldick 2008, 50-1)

It has long been a subject of debate between researchers whether or not classical detective fiction was cathartic to the reader. Cawelti for instance argues that the genre (and popular fiction in general) provides a middle way between the reader's two greatest impulses: the need for safety, order, familiarity and predictability on the one hand, and the desire for uncertainty, risk, confusion and mystery on the other (Cawelti 1976, 16). Christie provides both: the presentation of a world in which everyone is duplicitous and paranoia is justified satisfies the drive for mystery and danger, while the eventual and formulaic (re)solution enables the reader to see these troubles from a distance that keeps the story enjoyable. For Auden, on the contrary, the fantasy that the reader fulfils while reading detective fiction is not a secret and shameful fantasy of violence and murder but "the fantasy of being restored to the Garden of Eden, to a state of innocence, where he may know love as love and not as the law. The driving force behind this daydream is the feeling of guilt, the cause of which is unknown to the dreamer": it is the fantasy that sin is not within the self, but within another a fictional, evil character that can be identified and removed (Auden 1974, 409). For Mijolla-Mellor and Rowland (who both speak from a psychoanalytical perspective), detective fiction (especially Christie's) is a successful genre because it confronts the reader with his/her own deepest fears and traumas (the trauma of betrayal and evil being close to the self, or even *within* the self, and inherent in society) while providing a safety net, i.e. the certainty that the guilty party will be arrested and no harm will be done (since the victim him- or herself was a monster) (Mijolla-Mellor 2006, 305, and Rowland 2001, 86). Auden's views on the one hand and Mijolla-Mellor's and Rowland's views on the other, while contradictory, can be entertained alternately by the readers according to their sensibility.

⁵⁶ For Auden, the structure of the closed circle is typical of Aristotelian tragedy: "there is Concealment (the innocent seem guilty and the guilty seem innocent) and Manifestation (the real guilt is brought to consciousness). There is also peripeteia, in this case not a reversal of fortune but a double reversal from apparent guilt to innocence and from apparent innocence to guilt" (Auden 1974, 401).

There is no doubt, however, that the detective story is theoretically cathartic *for the characters*. As explained in 3.1. and 3.2., the murderer is the embodiment of the characters' repressed desire to kill the victim; as such, the identification and removal of the murderer from the circle acts as an effective purification (*via* identification then rejection) of the characters' own guilty impulses. In *Mesopotamia*, the characters' feelings for the murderer are described as "a sea of horror... Yes, and not only horror. Pity, too" (Christie 2001b, 347). The feelings of mingled horror and pity are characteristic of catharsis – while the characters do understand the murderer's position, they still disapprove of it. Nevertheless, this catharsis is extremely problematic as far as the characters are concerned. During the whole novel, the double (i.e. the murderer as embodiment of the characters' murderous desires) is given a twofold role: on the one hand, it emulates the tension between conformity and transgression that inhabits society *and* it plays the role of a scapegoat helping this social body to deny its own drives by attributing them onto another figure on the other hand. More exactly, during the first part of the story when each character seems guilty, the always elusive murderer reflects the moral ambivalence of the group because of the omnipresent and gloomy certainty that the murderer is 'one of us'; but once the culprit is identified, he/she is to be conceived as an *outer* projection of this desire for transgression. For instance, in *Styles*, the identification of Inglethorp and Evie as the culprits is a relief for the characters: neither of the two characters *truly* belong to the family (one is the hated step-father, the other is a servant), meaning that the transgression did not really come from inside after all. Because they externalise their own guilt onto another figure they do not identify with, the Cavendishes do not have to face the tension of inner conflict in the end. Their secret desire to get rid of Emily Inglethorp can be forgotten and, because the social order is restored, the endemic problems that have caused the murderous desire to emerge are left unaddressed and unsolved. The happy ending – built on the benefits reaped from the victim's death – is thus extremely questionable: if the transgression systematically comes from inside and if enclosure causes or worsens the problem, then is this return to 'the good old order' at all possible? The serialisation of Christie's books – one or more published each year – also suggests that the detective's victory is ephemeral: as soon as one case is closed, the detective must hurry to another crime scene. (This issue of never-ending criminality was already a feature of the Sherlock Holmes' stories: see 1.2.1.) In *Mesopotamia* and *Orient Express*, Poirot has only just closed a case when he is confronted with a new one: this tends to suggest that Poirot was right when he adhered to the Biblical principle that that "evil was done everywhere under the sun" (Christie 2001e, 21). This constant succession of transgressions points to the paradox of the genre, between

containing and expressing criminal desire in the social body and to the conflicting desires of the readers, who want resolution yet also want more mysteries to solve, i.e. more murders.

That each of Christie's characters is proven time and again to have the potential to commit murder is also extremely problematic as far as the resolution is concerned. While the blame is very easily rejected onto one character in particular, the fact that every single theory is plausible during the novel means that, to some extent, the solution Christie chose might not be the *only* consistent or possible one (Bayard 2008, 51). Bayard's own writings, in which he sets out to prove that a character other than the murderer identified at the end of the book actually committed the crime, are a proof that the texts always remain open to interpretation. Bayard's alternative "solutions" brought to the mysteries of *Ackroyd* and *None* suggest that other readings are equally possible and justifiable. Indeed, all the characters wear a mask and have things to dissimulate, all of them have an interest and a *desire* to see the victim dead. In this sense, a sense of general guilt pervades the novel, and no character seems truly innocent. Auden acknowledges this in his essay "The Guilty Vicarage":

For suspects, the principal causes of guilt are:

- 1) the wish or even the intention to murder;
- 2) [offenses against God and one's neighbour] (*e.g.*, illicit amours) which the suspect is afraid or ashamed to reveal;
- 3) a *hubris* of intellect which tries to solve the crime itself and despises the official police (assertion of the supremacy of the aesthetic over the ethical). If great enough, this *hubris* leads to its subject getting murdered;
- 4) a *hubris* of innocence which refuses to co-operate with the investigation;
- 5) a lack of faith in another loved suspect, which leads its subject to hide or confuse clues. (Auden 1974, 405-406)

All of Christie's characters, with little exception, are guilty of such faults – and most especially of crime number one. To mention a few examples: Pilar and Stephen Farr lied about their identities in *Christmas* (crime 2), Lawrence Cavendish complicated the investigation to dissimulate Cynthia's alleged guilt (crime 5) and Mary Cavendish hid that she went to Emily's room to see her will (crime 2) in *Styles*, and in *Mesopotamia* Miss Johnson investigated Louise Leidner's murder and found out who the murderer was, but she covered for him and refused to help Poirot, which led to her murder (crimes 3, 4 and 5). All the characters in Christie's closed circles are thus guilty of something. This means, in turn, that guilt is *not* completely purged at the end of the novel, and that it is *society itself* that is under attack: immorality, vices, and guilt seem universal. The characters who are punished are the ones who committed offenses and crimes punishable by law, but the characters guilty of "mean spiteful little sins" (Christie 2002e, 83) seem to roam the world.

The potential of guilt that is acknowledged throughout each story is also extremely problematic, for it suggests that the potential of killing is universal as well. Suspicion itself suggests as much. If suspicion and paranoia in Christie's closed circles can be seen as a form of delusion, then the fact that delusion is a product of something repressed in the unconscious must be kept in mind. To quote Freud's *Delusion and Dream in Wilhelm Jensen's 'Gradiva'*:

If the patient believes in his delusion so firmly, it does not happen because of inversion of his powers of judgment, and does not proceed from what is erroneous in the delusion; but in every delusion there lies also a little grain of truth; there is something in it which really deserves belief, and this is the source of the conviction of the patient, who is, to this extent, justified. This true element, however, has been repressed for a long time; if it finally succeeds in pushing into consciousness (this time in disfigured form), the feeling of a conviction clinging to it, as if in compensation, is over-strong [...]. (Freud 2003, 262)

If paranoid suspicion is indeed a delusion or can be compared to it, then the characters' all-encompassing suspicions may be read as a sign of distrust towards humanity in general. The uncomfortable truth that was repressed is that the entire group is corrupted and cannot be trusted, and that each character is actually wary of their siblings, friends and colleagues (and with reason, if Freud is to be believed): for instance in *None*, even if the characters initially refuse to believe that the anonymous murderer is right about the other members of the group, their suspicions prove that *they actually believe that the accusations are true* – perhaps because they know that *they* are guilty, meaning that the others must be too, and that each character is actually and uncannily aware of “the workings of forces hitherto unsuspected in his fellow-men, but at the same time he is dimly aware of them in remote corners of his own being” (Freud 1953, 243). Paranoia is not necessarily disconnected from reality; the actual issue is that the connections it suggests are disproportionate. This shows also that the essence of the genre is to make the reader (and also the characters) doubt his/her certainties about reality as well as re-establishing order in the end.

Another feature of this universality of guilt is that no one is spared from it. The dilemma of the closed circle ploy (and of detective fiction in general) is that it is difficult to surprise the reader. Not only does the reader suspect everyone – which evidently removes the element of surprise from the equation, since the reader must have suspected the murderer at some point – but if the murderer turns out to be a random, unsurprising character, then the solution is bland: the murderer is interchangeable and there is little point in re-reading the book or remembering it (Dubois 1992, 143-4). Christie's strategy, on the other hand, is to surprise the reader, to prompt him/her into discarding a character from the very start and then revealing his/her guilt – which testifies to the focus not on realism but on the game with the reader. And indeed, in

closed circle mysteries, Christie's murderers turn out to be characters that are usually excluded from the circle: the character whose innocence was proved in court (*Styles*) or who was never acknowledged as a suspect to begin with (*Mesopotamia*), a character who was believed to be dead (*None*), the policeman investigating the murder (*Christmas*), the entire group of characters (*Orient Express*), the apparent victim (*Peril at End House*), the narrator of the novel (*Ackroyd*), a ten-year-old child (*Crooked House*), a banker (*One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*), a politician (*Appointment*) or the great detective Hercule Poirot himself (*Curtain*). As Laetitia Gonon points out, all these solutions are narrative transgressions of the rules of fair play (Gonon 2021, 37-8; see also Annexes B and C, and Part 1.4.1.), and, in some cases, transgressions of the contract between author and reader, in the case of *Ackroyd*. Christie's art is to choose murderers that are "impossible,"

not because of their social class, race or gender, individual psychology, professed ideology, or prominence or peripheralness to the narration but because the ideal reader produced by the conventions of the genre is incapable of considering them as suspects at all. The well-trained Christie reader comes to know that there is no such thing as an impossible murderer. (Hark 1997, 114)

I would argue, however, that these murderers are impossible in the genre because they are also impossible from a *social* point of view. Detective fiction is supposed to exemplify the restoration and upholding of social order; therefore, the rules of the genre require that the characters responsible for social harmony *cannot* be guilty. The reader is thus biased and Christie exploits the reader's blind spot in order to make the murderer's identity surprising and unforeseen. This surprise, however, is rather grim: the murderer's identity is profoundly unsettling because it represents an enormous social transgression. It suggests that the potential for murder is latent in *everyone*, even in the representatives of the social order: the murderers are a judge, a policeman, a detective (or rather, *the* detective), doctors, servants, husbands and wives, family, children, militaries, all of them respectable. It is the entire fabric of society that Christie is calling into question in her closed circle mysteries. In effect, she uses a subgenre where *everybody* must be suspected in equal parts to suggest that in society, everybody indeed is capable of evil. The novel's apparently bourgeois outlook on life is questionable: the lower classes are excluded because they are too easily associated with criminality and thus uninteresting in the genre, but instead the middle- and upper-classes turn out to be criminally populated; Poirot himself confesses to having a bourgeois mindset (Christie 2000, 158) yet commits murder in *Curtain* and condones one in *Orient Express*; the righteous English social order seems to prevail at the end but its guardians and, in fact, everybody in this order is capable of evil. The fact that the closed circle is a microcosm representing society itself is just

as unsettling: Christie declares in *Mesopotamia* that “an expedition is probably like our life here in miniature” (Christie 2001b, 27), and the stereotyped characterisations as well as the familiar settings tend to suggest a form of universality. If the closed circle stands for society, and if each member of the closed circle is guilty of something and possesses murderous potential and the desire to kill, then *it must be true of society as a whole*. This means that Christie’s works deal not with actual crime but with the repressed desire for murder *in the social body*. In that light, the characters’ Judas-like betrayal of the victim and of social rules stands for society in general and attests to a generalised problem. What Christie depicts, in short, is the picture of a morally corrupt – or at least decaying – society, which pretends to live in a *Beau Idéal* order but ignores its systemic flaws to the point that only murder is the solution to abuse; the happy ending is satisfactory to the reader on a superficial level, but creates uneasiness once one thinks of it, for it looks utopian and ultimately short-lived. The restoration of social order is not even guaranteed for sure: as *Orient Express* and *None* show, murderers may walk away unpunished by the law and roam the Earth freely.

The novel that illustrates these social issues best is *Curtain*. Christie wrote this novel in 1940 and 1941, i.e. at the end of the decade she dedicated to writing closed circle mysteries, and intended it to be Poirot’s very last story – a final position that is interesting for, according to Peter Hühn, in this novel, “Christie comes very close to dissolving the basic premises of the classic formula, the existence and accessibility of the absolute and unambiguous truth” (Hühn 1997, 45). Indeed, Christie uses this novel to underline every systemic flaw that the closed circle formula touches upon, in an apotheosis of social criticism.

This final Poirot novel starts where the first started: at Styles Court. Throughout the novel, the memory of the first murder committed in the house looms over the characters:

Did the fact that death by violence – by malice aforethought – had taken place in a certain spot leave its impression on that spot so strongly that it was perceptible after many years? Psychic people said so. Did Styles definitely bear traces of that event that had occurred so long ago? Here, within these walls, in these gardens, thoughts of murder had lingered and grown stronger and had at last come to fruition in the final act. Did they still taint the air? (Christie 2002a, 80)

‘Houses do have an atmosphere,’ I said thoughtfully. ‘This house has a bad history.’ Poirot nodded. ‘Yes. There have been people here – several of them – who desired deeply that someone else should die. That is true enough.’ (*ibid.*, 174-5)

These two declarations are extremely troubling, for they make it clear that catharsis was not achieved, contrary to what was suggested at the end of *Styles*. This failed catharsis is acknowledged by Poirot’s declaration that several characters wished for someone’s death in Styles Court – a direct admission of this generalised yet repressed transgressive desire, that

was only implicit in *Styles* – but also by the declaration that these guilty desires still linger in the *garden* – meaning that the restoration of the house to an Eden-like state fell short. Guilt was not absolved or purified; instead, it still haunts the characters and the house: there is an “atmosphere” that “lingers” and “taints the air,” something old yet not quite dead that Hastings explicitly connects with psychic experience. In spite of the Gothic tones of these declarations, however, the problem is not supernatural in nature; the issue is that order is short-lived and crime is inevitable, and the eventual return to *Styles* is an acknowledgement to this issue.

Christie also implicitly indicates that this issue is not exclusive to *Styles Court*, but is a generalised social problem. As shown in 3.2.1., Christie’s settings are representations of the characters’ mindspaces and of the group’s internal conflicts. However, in *Curtain*, the house stands not simply for the group of suspects, but for society as a whole. The descriptions – a lot more numerous than in *Styles* – establish that quite clearly:

As my taxi passed through the village, though, I realized the passage of years. *Styles St. Mary* was altered out of all recognition. Petrol stations, a cinema, two more inns and rows of council houses.

Presently we turned in at the gate of the *Styles*. Here we seemed to recede again from modern times. The park was much as I remembered it, but the drive was badly kept and much overgrown with weeds growing up over the gravel. We turned a corner and came in view of the house. It was unaltered from the outside and badly needed a coat of paint. (*ibid.*, 10)

My own room, which had not been large, was unaltered save for the installation of hot and cold water, and part of it had been partitioned off to make a small bathroom. It was furnished in a cheap modern style which rather disappointed me. I should have preferred a style more nearly approximating the architecture of the house itself. (*ibid.*, 15)

This new *Styles* corresponds to the new England – and the new world – that emerged in the 20th century. Society has been modernised “out of all recognition.” Hastings superimposes his memory of *Styles St. Mary* and *Styles Court* to the new, actual versions he has in front of him, and is given to see a strange image of England: one where the traditional structure of the house and of society has been conserved, yet everything has completely changed. The house and Hastings’ room in particular are thus a mix of the *Beau Idéal* covered with a varnish of modernity: this is the depiction of a country that is subjected to extreme social change and trying to keep up with it, and yet still tries to maintain its oldest traditions, resulting in an uncomfortable combination. In addition, one might notice the description of the garden: since the garden of *Styles* stands for the attempted and failed return to Eden, its description as “badly kept” and “overgrown with weeds” indicates that not only has the restoration of order failed, but things seem to have *worsened* over time. If one takes into account that this house

represents both one's psyche *and* society at large, then the conclusion is rather worrying: it seems like the psyche of the characters and of society itself are in a pitiful state, unwatched and unkempt. It is no wonder that murder can proliferate in such conditions. The nostalgic tone of the novel may be read as an extreme version of the pessimism that pervades the whole genre, if we consider the unending task of fighting crime that Poirot has ascribed to himself.

And murder, indeed, proliferates in that house – not only are two murders and two attempts to kill committed in this house, but the house has become a shelter for a mysterious serial murderer whose identity Poirot only knows. This murderer, Poirot explains to Hastings, is a character who managed to commit five murders without being suspected and without even needing to be *in situ* to commit them – and this murderer is going to strike again in Styles, unless Poirot and Hastings stop him. This murderer is eventually revealed to be Stephen Norton, an innocuous-, sweet-looking man whose *modus operandi* is unusual:

And the art of X⁵⁷ was this: not to suggest the desire, but to break down the normal decent resistance. It was an art perfected by long practice. X knew the exact word, the exact phrase, the intonation even to suggest and to bring cumulative pressure on a weak spot! It could be done. It was done without the victim ever suspecting. It was not hypnotism – hypnotism would not have been successful. It was something more insidious, more deadly. It was a marshalling of the forces of a human being to widen a breach instead of repairing it. (*ibid.*, 260-1)

According to Poirot, Norton is “the perfect criminal” (*ibid.*, 259) because he cannot ever be accused or convicted. What is implied, here, is that Norton is the ultimate murderer because he represents *the very impulse to commit murder*; Norton is the embodiment of *temptation*. I have illustrated before that murder was the Zero Hour, the breaking point when the dig of social pressure and self-restraint eventually breaks in the character's psyche and lets way to an explosion of violence. Here, Poirot describes in similar terms Norton's action: his strategy is to “break down,” to “widen a breach,” to “bring cumulative pressure” until the dam of morality gives out. As Poirot underlines, Norton does not create the desire to kill, for it already exists – indeed, this desire is universal. Instead, his work consists in tempting the characters into giving way to it and acting upon it: “he could make people do things they didn't want to do – or (mark this) thought they did not want to do” (*ibid.*, 263), “even Norton has to have a nucleus on which to work. You can only develop a thing of which the seed is already present” (*ibid.*, 264). Norton's talent is to detect unconscious desire and whisper into

⁵⁷Throughout the novel, Poirot hides the murderer's identity by calling him “X.” This designation is reminiscent of the expression “X factor,” which was coined in the 1930s and means “a circumstance, quality, or person that has a strong but unpredictable influence” (“X factor,” n.d.). The expression fits Norton's role; see below.

people's ear to bring this desire to consciousness and lure characters into actualising it. In this light, Norton can be seen as a dark double figure of the detective: both detect and analyse people's weaknesses, personalities, and repressed desires, but the detective uses his powers for good, to bring order back and absolve guilt (at least temporarily) while Norton uses his talents to unleash chaos and precipitate one's fall.

For this reason, it is fitting that Norton should be Poirot's last case, but also Poirot's demise. As said above, Norton embodies temptation. The character is, quite literally, the serpent in the Garden of Eden. Throughout the entire novel, Norton is primarily associated with the garden: not only is this where Hastings most often meets him, but Norton's identity seems to revolve around this place. He is an amateur ornithologist, constantly roaming the garden and watching birds, and even Poirot acknowledges this as his defining trait – "Norton, *the gentle-natured loving man*, was a secret sadist" (*ibid.*, 264; emphasis mine). When Norton tempts Colonel Luttrell and Hastings into committing murder, the scene takes place in the garden – the symbol of the rotten psyche and failure of the ideal social order – and when Colonel Luttrell impulsively acts upon this desire, the description of Daisy Luttrell's body is associated with a description of the garden:

She had been kneeling, tying a stake against one of the small fruit trees. The grass was long there so that I realized how it was that the Colonel had not seen her clearly and had only distinguished movement in the grass. The light, too, was confusing. She had been shot through the shoulder and the blood was gushing out. (*ibid.*, 119)

This almost pastoral description is incredibly sinister when associated with the description of blood and of a murder attempt. The scene evokes the Fall – Colonel Luttrell let himself be tempted and it was his wife who fell underneath the trees of the supposedly idyllic garden. In Hastings' comment (see above) that "within these walls, in these gardens, thoughts of murder [...] had at last come to *fruition*", associated with Daisy's body lying under the "small fruit trees," the use of the word "fruit" is evocative: the actualisation (i.e. fruition) of the desire to kill is likened to the eating of the Forbidden Fruit from the tree of knowledge of good and evil, i.e. of the Fall of humanity as it succumbs to temptation and commits the original sin (murder being, as Auden theorised, the biggest offence against God and society; see Auden 1974, 402). The imagery likening the circle of suspects to Christ's Last Meal also highlights that actualising the murderous desire is akin to the Fall: one may remember that it is Judas' possession by a devil (i.e., Judas' guilty desire and temptation) that leads him to betray the rest of his own circle.

Norton's *modus operandi* is indeed strikingly similar to the biblical serpent's that blurs the boundary between good and evil. In the Book of Genesis, the serpent convinces Eve to eat the

Forbidden Fruit with its words, for it was “more subtle than any beast of the field which the Lord God had made” (Genesis 3:1), and the rest of the Bible describes manipulation by referring to the serpent: “They have sharpened their tongues like a serpent; adders’ poison is under their lips” (Psalms 140:3).⁵⁸ His technique can be observed throughout the whole novel, but a short example should suffice to illustrate Norton’s power. The following excerpt shows how Norton tempts Colonel Luttrell into killing his tyrannical wife:

‘I say, Hastings, that was pretty ghastly. It gets my back up to see that poor old boy bullied like that. And the meek way he takes it! Poor chap. Not much of the peppery-tongued Indian colonel about him.’

‘Ssh,’ I warned him, for Norton’s voice had been raised and I was afraid old Colonel Luttrell would overhear.

‘No, but it is too bad.’

I said with feeling: ‘I shall understand it if he ever takes a hatchet to her.’

Norton shook his head. ‘He won’t. The iron’s entered into his soul. He’ll go on: “Yes, m’dear, no, m’dear, sorry, m’dear,” pulling at his moustache and bleating meekly until he’s put in his coffin. *He* couldn’t assert himself if he tried!” (*ibid.*, 65-6)

Norton indirectly suggests murder: not only can he plausibly deny ever suggesting Luttrell should kill his wife (since Luttrell simply overheard a private conversation) but this strategy allows him to make Luttrell feel personally insulted by the fact that this is what his friends say of him behind his back. Norton tailored his words to insult the Colonel: he constantly refers to the Colonel as weak (“meek,” “meekly” – the repetition drills the insult into the Colonel’s brain), infantilises him by implying he is being “bullied” like a schoolboy and by showing pity. The feminine vocabulary (“meek”) as well as the mockery (“yes, m’dear”) is a malicious way of humiliating Colonel Luttrell by emasculating him – an offense that a British military can hardly allow. This venomous discourse is quite similar to the internal dialogue one could have with his own psyche: Norton here plays the role of the devil on Luttrell’s shoulder, of the internal and amoral voice suggesting he should give in to his desire, free himself, and reassert himself as a man by killing his tyrannical wife.

Norton’s embodiment of the serpent figure is acknowledged even by Poirot himself: Norton takes pleasure not only in tempting people into murder, but also in the characters’ subsequent suspicion. In the novel, Poirot refers to this suspicion twice and compares its deadly work to a serpent’s: “You look, my friend, like one who has envisaged a nest of serpents” (*ibid.*, 76) and “Will [suspicion] come into your mind, lying there like some dark serpent that now and then raises its head and says: “Suppose Judith...?”” (*ibid.*, 277). When Poirot kills Norton, he even leaves a mark that associates Norton with temptation and murder:

⁵⁸ Christie quotes Psalms 140:3 in *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* to refer to the murderer’s lies (Christie 2000, 176).

“The mark on Norton's forehead – it was like the brand of Cain...” (*ibid.*, 284). The comparison with Cain is interesting, for it suggests that, like Cain ceased to be his “brother’s keeper” (Genesis 4:9), a murderer ceases to look after his brothers’ best interests (i.e. his group and, more largely, society). Moreover, by likening Norton to the first murderer, Christie suggests that Norton’s civil identity as Stephen Norton is less relevant than the symbol he embodies: what Poirot is confronted with in this novel is *the desire of murder itself*. In Robin Woods’ words: “Because the contagion of Norton's criminality has already spread throughout the community, on the level of both the narrator and the reader, Poirot cannot simply isolate and remove it. The law cannot punish universal guilt; it can only (wrongly) punish its manifestations, not the demon who stirs them up” (Woods 1997, 109). What Poirot can do is kill Norton, i.e. eliminate the desire to commit murder, but Poirot’s victory is also a defeat: Norton successfully detected Poirot’s biggest weakness – the weak spot that only required a little prodding to make Poirot discard his bourgeois morality and believe that his murder was justified. The biggest warden of social order is thus lost twice over – first as he becomes a murderer and then when he kills himself to avoid committing murder again. In this sense, *Curtain* represents a much bigger transgression to the usual generic practices than *Ackroyd*: even as the narrator was revealed to be a liar that the reader must actively play against in order to win the detective game, the detective’s role as an agent of good remained the backbone of the genre. Christie’s transgressions in *Curtain* come close to destroying the fundamentals of the genre.

Indeed, this temptation spares no one, true to Christie’s idea that everyone without exception is a potential murderer. Poirot initially lists five of Norton’s murders that

all occurred in different places and amongst different classes of people. Moreover, there seems no superficial resemblance between them. That is to say, one was a case of jealousy, one was an unhappy wife seeking to get rid of her husband, another had money for a motive, another was, you might say, unselfish in aim since the murderer did not try to escape punishment, and the fifth was frankly brutal, probably committed under the influence of drink. (*ibid.*, 27-8)

This description of Norton’s actions makes the desire to murder appear generalised, not to say universal: every single class of society is concerned, without discrimination on the basis of motive. This echoes Poirot’s declaration that evil is a universal issue (“*There has been an epidemic of that in the world of late years – L'appétit vient en mangeant,*” Poirot declares in *Curtain*, *ibid.*, 264), but also the idea that it comes in many shapes – some dreadful, and some one can empathise with. Norton’s talent consists in making people believe that their murder would be justified and committed for good reasons. In the novel, Pr Franklin – no doubt

influenced by Norton – brings up this question of morality: “What is evil? What is good? Ideas on them vary from century to century” (*ibid.*, 75), “suppose a man thinks he has a divine right to kill a dictator or a moneylender or a pimp or whatever arouses his moral indignation. He commits what *you* consider a guilty deed – but what he considers is an innocent one?” (*ibid.*). This rhetoric that questions the supposed immorality of murder goes along with the unusually explicit understanding several characters feel in the novel for murderers and would-be murderers, such as Hastings who expresses above that he “shall understand it if [Colonel Luttrell] ever takes a hatchet to [his wife].”

This compassion and empathy for a murderer is rather frightening in a social context, but Christie takes it one step further: in the novel, Hastings is also tempted into killing Allerton (the man who, according to Norton, tries to seduce Hastings’ daughter Judith) and the reader gets to follow Hastings’ point of view as he decides to commit murder and prepares himself for it. This manipulation of the readers’ sympathies is only another example of the narrative manipulations in Christie’s novels, although with different results here. It may be read as an intra-textual comment on the genre’s innate strategies which revolve around this type of “tricks” played on the readers. Indeed, this is not the first time Christie places the reader in an ambiguous situation vis-à-vis the murderer: in *Ackroyd*, the murderer is the narrator too, a character the reader had time to attach him- or herself to and feel understanding for. In *Orient Express*, the murder is explicitly condoned and the reader and Poirot are made to feel sympathy for the murderers. In *None*, the reader sees things from the point of view of characters who are also murderers, and can either side with them, or with their executer, meaning that in each case the reader is on a murderer’s side. However, *Curtain* places the reader directly into the head of someone planning a murder. In the chapter dedicated to this event, the process described is blood-curdling in its apparent simplicity. Hastings insists over and over on the simplicity and easiness of the procedure (it is all “so ridiculously simple,” “easily enough,” “all quite easy and natural,” *ibid.*, 167-8), and the cold, factual way in which he describes his actions and his plan bears witness to the grim straightforwardness of murder. This novel is Christie’s answer to the question ‘how does one become a murderer?’ and the answer is rather sinister: it happens easily, once one gives way to his/her most shameful desires and feels justified. Hastings’ slip into (temporary) immorality looks perfectly natural to him in the moment – a rather terrifying thought knowing that in the Poirot series Hastings has always embodied not only the normal man, but also the *relatable* narrator. As Peter Manus points out, the motives of Christie’s characters are usually relatable to the reader: “The motives are also disturbingly familiar: who among us has never dreamt up evil scenarios

when faced with the oh-so-sweet-and-just-out-of-reach prospect of love or money?” (Manus 2017). In that sense, the reader’s suspicions towards the characters take an uncanny turn: he/she suspects them because he/she is conscious that these motives are deeply human and that anyone could succumb to them – because, as Freud posited, he/she recognises within them his/her own repressed, unconscious desires. Following Knight’s comment, this identification of the reader with the murderer gives

an awareness of possible deviance within the reader’s self. Guilt, like disorder and detection, could be ‘done from within’. [...] The power to trace the criminal by oneself responds to personal doubt. This level of anxiety, lurking beneath the more overt fear of a concealed enemy of the self, is touched sharply by Christie’s bold plotting [...]. (Knight 1980, 112-3)

In these novels, Christie thus breaks the safe distance she had established between the reader and the characters for example by using humour (e.g. depicting the idyllic rural life with such exaggerated traits so as to suggest satire), by bringing formulaic resolution, or by picking a monstrous or unsympathetic villain. While most of Christie’s closed circle novels provide the usual, acceptable happy ending one expects to see, Christie questions the possibility of this happy restoration to social order time and again. All the novels in which the murderer is made a respectable or a sympathetic figure the reader is drawn to or trusts, in which the reader relates to the murderer in one way or another, or in which murder is condoned, understandable, or enjoyable as far as it is a just punishment of the victim, transgresses the apparent light-heartedness of the genre. In *Curtain*, but also *Orient Express* and *None* and various others, Christie brings the formula to its inevitable outcome and tackles the logical, yet unsettling, implications of a subgenre in which the primordial truth is that everyone without exception is a potential murderer.

Conclusion to Chapter Three

This final chapter of my *mémoire* analysed the core of the closed circle of suspects ploy: the closed circle itself. This study of the social aspect of enclosure tackled what is at stake in such a mystery. The source of the murder, but also of the web of suspicions, of the uncanny atmosphere, and of the social issues that Christie creates and tackles, is an original tension within the group. Christie consistently depicts groups that are fractured from the start; they form a society that cannot function properly, most often because the future victim abuses and divides the group and/or because the group's general interest goes directly against each character's individual wishes. This original strain leads to a desire to kill, that each character tries (more or less successfully) to repress as tension builds up and reaches a breaking point. This repression is at the origin of the uncanny atmosphere that pervades the novels: as the murder is committed, the characters are confronted with the enactment of their most shameful and secret desire, while the group of people they once knew is revealed for what it truly is – a broken society, in which familiar faces hide an alien malevolent spirit. That the murderer acted upon the murderous drive that the characters are secretly intimate with makes it impossible to identify the guilty party: the characters are aware that their desire is shared by the whole group. For the duration of the novel, and until the resolution, the murderer metaphorically wears each and every character's face in turn, creating a sense of paranoia that spatial enclosure only worsens: the characters are physically trapped with a danger they cannot identify. The enclosed setting, in this case, becomes a prison and a nightmare of paranoia. This paranoia does not affect only the characters, however: in order to keep the murderer's identity a secret until the very end, Christie makes sure that every character looks guilty, with no exception. While this is the *raison d'être* of the closed circle technique, the effect is unsettling for the readers. That this paranoia is completely justified within the genre suggests that, to some extent, everyone in the closed circle – and in society at large – is guilty and to be distrusted. In her novels, Christie presents a rather grim vision of society: several novels surmise that everyone is a potential murderer – even the reader him- or herself.

What Christie's closed circle mysteries illustrate, in the end, is that the murderer is always *within* – within a society that is not as safe as one thought, within the comforting confines of the home, within the select group of loved ones, and – at the root of it all, perhaps most chillingly – within oneself.

Conclusion

I started this *mémoire* by asking how spatial enclosure and social enclosure – seemingly so unlike – worked in complement to each other in Agatha Christie’s closed circles of suspects: how could the technique rely entirely on the interaction between such different types of confinement?

As this *mémoire* demonstrated, this combination was certainly unusual. Christie’s innovation, when she started writing, consisted of joining two important motifs of the genre and giving them a new significance. The first motif was spatial enclosure, which had been a determining trait of the genre from its very creation for the challenges it posed to rational thinking – for the readers as well as for the characters. Christie brought her own flair to the genre by connecting the Gothic terror caused by physical confinement to the second motif, i.e. a more social approach to the genre. This approach, in addition to holding a special interest for the sociological roots of criminality, drew a metaphorical boundary between one’s (supposedly safe) inside sphere and the (allegedly threatening) outside world. In spite of their differences, these two motifs – only rarely ever combined together – relied on a similar principle: the danger always came from within – within the locked room, or within the social group.

When Christie started writing, she inherited not only these two traditions, but also the newest requirements of readers towards detective fiction. As such, Christie recognised that the best way to meet the genre’s prerequisites was to add together these two motifs to create a new one: the motif of double enclosure, otherwise called the closed circle of suspects. Christie notably turned the figurative boundary between inside and outside spheres into a physical one, but also strictly limited the characters and the story within the confines of one setting – contrary to other subgenres of detective fiction in which the detective roamed the city and identified the culprit among thousands of other souls. This augmented spatial boundary led to a new form of enclosure: the locked-down characters indeed became a closed society, set apart from the rest of the world. In Christie’s mysteries, spatial and social enclosures are thus interdependent.

On the one hand, social enclosure entirely depends on spatial enclosure, since it is spatial enclosure that delineates the group under investigation. It of course satisfied the new conditions of the genre – that all suspects be identified from the start and given equal attention; however, this relationship has more consequences on the narrative than mere convenience for Christie. That spatial enclosure usually predates the murder shows that the

disorder in the community also predates the murder: by removing the closed circle from society and locating it in heterotopias, i.e. settings in rupture with society and normality, Christie shows groups that are distanced from civilisation. In Christie's mysteries, the sociological explanation for crime is thus physical confinement: distance from actual society leads to a general disregard for the laws ensuring social order, while confinement to a limited social circle, in a restricted environment, results in ever-increasing tension.

On the other hand, social confinement is what turns spatial enclosing into imprisonment in Christie's novels. Because the social circle is too restricted, characters are subjected to intense social pressure that generates tensions and desires that the characters must repress; but in turn, these repressed desires (most often desires of murder) turn this closed environment into a toxic one. The closed setting itself bears the marks of the group's issues: deceptively ideal at best and oppressing at worst, the physical settings of the novels always create (or perhaps reveal) discomfort. Murder, as an eruption of these violent yet unconscious desires, exposes this original disorder within the group of suspects. This uncomfortable reality is brought to consciousness along with other truths the characters had tried to repress: their own murderous desires actualised by the murderer, first, but also the fact that they do not trust the members of their private circle. At this moment, the enclosed space becomes a claustrophobic prison in which there is no escaping the suspicious gazes of others or one's own distrust of loved ones.

The core of Christie's closed circle mysteries is thus the relationship to alterity. The spatially enclosed setting is supposed to delimit a solid boundary between the threats of an unknown, agitated outside world and the familiar, privileged inside world. Nevertheless, the closed circle technique systematically reverses this boundary by locating the danger – be it the murderer or the source of disorder – within the physical confines of the setting and within the limits of the private social circle. This inversion is traumatic, for it locates the murderous Other not outside, but inside, in the realm of the Same: the murderer is not the typical lowlife, but “one of us,” one that belonged with the other characters.

This inversion of inside and outside is typical of the Gothic genre. With the closed circle ploy, Christie draws from the very origins of the genre, which was originally a spin on the classical Gothic tale: the detective story, like the Gothic story, is a challenge to rational thinking and a confrontation with human wickedness. Such tales usually make use of spatial enclosure to make a locked-room crime look impossible; Christie, on the other hand, uses *both* types of enclosure to create *too many* possibilities. The purpose of the closed circle technique – that all suspects be unequivocally identified from the start and given equal attention – has a rather sinister impact on the narrative: contrary to the ‘open’ murder mystery

where the detective meets characters of various narrative importance, in the closed circle mystery everyone looks equally suspicious, and no one is innocent of criminal intent, even if this intent is unconscious. The Gothic monster in these novels – i.e. the murderer, who enacts the group’s repressed wish – is always human, always normal – at least in appearance – and usually well-integrated in the social circle. The central question of the whodunnit – “who?” – is given a sinister spin as it haunts the characters and plunges them into a nightmare of suspicion and paranoia. Because of Christie’s process of double enclosure, the Gothic in Christie’s mysteries is thus social in nature: the terror and trauma the characters go through do not come from the supernatural or from madness, but from the realisation that danger to society always comes from within society itself, and from within each and every individual.

There is thus a paradox between the reasons why Christie came up with the double enclosure process, and the consequences of that process in her novels. In theory, double enclosure is meant to be ludic. The (often mapped) enclosed space recalls a board game – the reader/player has to analyse the characters’ movements within a self-contained setting where every element has meaning – while the closed social circle itself is reminiscent of a murder party: it is the reader’s role to consider each character as players to defeat. That each character *could have* committed the crime is the entire point of the game – this makes it entertaining and suspenseful, and thus pleasurable. For this reason, the reader is willing to suspend his/her own disbelief and to ignore the artificiality of such an enclosure; the closed circle is a contrivance, but a useful one that allows for the game to be played in full. Yet, for all its playfulness, the formula leads Christie to depict a troubling representation of society: Christie portrays a social order that is systematically threatened from the inside, in which each individual without exception is capable of committing murder. Christie, far from shying away from the implications of the formula she used, embraces them: in order to complicate the game, she does not hesitate to make murderers out of everyone, from the inconspicuous figure that would remind readers of their loved ones to the respectable upholders of social harmony.

Double enclosure exposes this social order as a failure from the very start of each novel; while the eventual, formulaic happy ending at the end of each novel seems to restore order for good, the closed circle mystery implies that guilt cannot be exorcised and rejected from respectable society, because everyone within that good society is guilty already – if not of murder, at least of murderous drives. What double enclosure illustrates, in the end, is that no matter how isolated one is from external dangers or how carefully chosen one’s company is, order is always threatened from within.

How, in conclusion, do spatial enclosure and social enclosure work together in Christie's mysteries in spite of their apparent differences? By answering this question, this *mémoire* illustrated that the closed circle formula is more than a mere generic outline. This process of double enclosure is complex and multidimensional, and thus arduous to summarise in only a few words. If I were to summarise this multifaceted relationship, however, my answer would be as follows: The physical and social boundaries enclosing the setting and the circle are one and the same, for the walls of the setting delineate a carefully chosen social world. Nevertheless, this closed circle is, first and foremost, a vicious circle: spatial enclosure creates a social crisis which, in turn, converts the enclosed space into a prison.

Behind this deceptively simple summary, one can actually find the answer to many a question regarding Christie's detective fiction – and, perhaps, classic detective fiction at large. The closed circle of suspects tackles issues of fictional spaces and societal issues; studying it allows for a better understanding of the history and evolution of the detective genre, of the game of detection between the writer and the reader, and of the writer's strategies. This analysis of the closed circle ploy also gives one a better comprehension of the issues of tensions, guilt and suspicion in Christie's novels, but also of Christie's perspective on the workings of the human mind.

Indeed, this subject of research encompasses many underlying themes and issues of Christie's detective fiction – more than I could tackle in two years of work, especially when strictly limiting myself to the topic of enclosure. I believe that my research on enclosure brings about a number of related questions that future research could focus on.

It would be interesting, first, to focus on this issue of double enclosure from a cinematographic point of view. Chapter Two of this *mémoire* analysed Christie's relationship to theatre and more especially the dramatisation of her novels, in order to show that her closed circle ploy is inherently theatrical and suited to a dramatic interpretation of the rules of verisimilitude. Nevertheless, if the enclosed setting is similar to a stage and theatrical adaptation works well in that regard, the same question must be asked about cinematographic adaptation. I noticed in my introduction that her most famous and most often adapted novels – *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Death on the Nile*, *And Then There Were None*, all of which have been adapted into movies and series as recently as May of 2021 – are all closed circles. While this cinematographic success is a proof of the enduring popularity of Christie's formula – still best-sellers a hundred years after the publication of her first novel – these adaptations raise a few questions as to the manner in which the process of double enclosure can be adapted onto the screen. It would be interesting, for instance, to examine the way in which

spatial enclosure and social enclosure are depicted. How do film directors render the “psychological claustrophobia” (see 3.2.) that pervades the novels? How do visual arts render the social anxiety generated by the enclosed setting and the resulting transformation of the setting into a prison? What does cinema bring to the formula – or, conversely, what may it fail to portray?

A second interesting topic of research would not tackle the process of double enclosure *per se*, but its implications. As seen above, the closed circle technique relies on the idea that each and every character is capable of the worst – it was, in fact, the reason why the technique was conceived to begin with. However, under Christie’s pen, this idea takes a sinister turn as it is suggested that the entirety of society is guilty of a crime or another. Even when innocent of the murder, the characters nevertheless committed an offense. This offense may be the unconscious desire to murder, or any of the other secrets the characters hide from the detective – lying, cheating, or even, as W.H. Auden mentions it, believing in another’s guilt (see 3.3.2.). In fact, according to Auden, it is precisely because the classical detective genre is a genre that deals with sin and guilt that the reader (and especially the English Protestant reader) enjoys the genre so much:

The magic formula is an innocence which is discovered to contain guilt; then a suspicion of being the guilty one; and finally a real innocence from which the guilty other has been expelled, a cure effected, not by me or my neighbors, but by the miraculous intervention of a genius from outside who removes guilt by giving knowledge of guilt. [...] The driving force behind this daydream is the feeling of guilt, the cause of which is unknown to the dreamer. The fantasy of escape is the same, whether one explains the guilt in Christian, Freudian, or any other terms. (Auden 1974, 409-10)

Christie’s major difference in that regard is that the restoration of order she operates at the end of her novels is superficial to say the least. In Christie’s works, the “devil” (i.e. murderer) lives in every single member of society, even the ones who should exorcise guilt and bring justice: every one of them is vulnerable to the demon of temptation, meaning that the expurgation of guilt appears superficial and is fated to be short-lived. In addition, Christie’s readers are made to feel sympathy for the devil in several of her novels. Christie’s Freudian portrayal of a universal wish to kill, in spite of her explicit Christian imagery regarding guilt and murder, is troubling. How to reconcile the paradox between the standards of the genre, that demand for guilt to be exorcised, and Christie’s writings, which hold the Protestant English idea of social order in high regard yet depict a society that is guilty in its entirety?

Annex A. Extract from *And Then There Were None*

“One of us... One of us... One of us...”

Three words, endlessly repeated, dinning themselves hour after hour into receptive brains.

Five people – five frightened people. Five people who watched each other, who now hardly troubled to hide their state of nervous tension.

There was little pretence now – no formal veneer of conversation. They were five enemies linked together by a mutual instinct of self-preservation.

And all of them, suddenly, looked less like human beings. They were reverting to more bestial types.

Like a wary old tortoise, Mr. Justice Wargrave sat hunched up, his body motionless, his eyes keen and alert. Ex-Inspector Blore looked coarser and clumsier in build. His walk was that of a slow padding animal. His eyes were bloodshot. There was a look of mingled ferocity and stupidity about him. He was like a beast at bay ready to charge its pursuers. Philip Lombard’s senses seemed heightened, rather than diminished. His ears reacted to the slightest sound. His step was lighter and quicker, his body was lithe and graceful. And he smiled often, his lips curling back from his long white teeth.

Vera Claythorne was very quiet. She sat most of the time huddled in a chair. Her eyes stared ahead of her into space. She looked dazed. She was like a bird that has dashed its head against glass and that has been picked up by a human hand. It crouches there, terrified, unable to move, hoping to save itself by its immobility.

Armstrong was in a pitiable condition of nerves. He twitched and his hands shook. He lighted cigarette after cigarette and stubbed them out almost immediately. The forced inaction of their position seemed to gall him more than the others. Every now and then he broke out into a torrent of nervous speech.

[...] And by now the thoughts that ran through their brains were abnormal, feverish, diseased...

“It’s Armstrong... I saw him looking at me sideways just then... his eyes are mad... quite mad... Perhaps he isn’t a doctor at all... That’s it, of course! ... He’s a lunatic, escaped from some doctor’s house – pretending to be a doctor... It’s true... shall I tell them? ... Shall I scream out? ... No, it won’t do to put him on his guard... Besides he can seem so sane... What time is it? ... Only a quarter past three! ... Oh, God, I shall go mad myself... *Yes, it’s Armstrong... He’s watching me now...*”

“They won’t get *me!* I can take care of myself... I’ve been in tight places before... Where the hell is that revolver? ... Who took it? ... Who’s got it? ... Nobody’s got it – we know that. We were all searched... Nobody *can* have it... *But someone knows where it is...*”

“They’re going mad... they’ll all go mad... Afraid of death... we’re all afraid of death... I’m afraid of death... Yes, but that doesn’t stop death coming... *‘The hearse is at the door, sir.’* Where did I read that? The girl... I’ll watch the girl. Yes, I’ll watch the girl...”

“Twenty to four. Only twenty to four... perhaps the clock has stopped... I don’t understand – no, I don’t understand... This sort of thing can’t happen... *it is happening...* Why don’t we wake up? Wake up – Judgment Day – no, not that! If only I could think... My head – something’s happening in my head – it’s going to burst – it’s going to split... This sort of thing can’t happen... What’s the time? Oh, God, it’s only a quarter to four.”

“I must keep my head... I must keep my head... If only I keep my head... It’s all perfectly clear – all worked out. But nobody must suspect. It may do the trick. It must! Which one? That’s the question – which one? I think – yes, I rather think – yes – *him.*”

When the clock struck five they all jumped.

Source: Christie, Agatha. [1939] 2011. *And Then There Were None* (New York: HarperCollins), pp. 211-5.

Annex B. “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories” by S.S. Van Dine

1. The reader must have equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described.

2. No willful tricks or deceptions may be placed on the reader other than those played legitimately by the criminal on the detective himself.

3. There must be no love interest. The business in hand is to bring a criminal to the bar of justice, not to bring a lovelorn couple to the hymeneal altar.

4. The detective himself, or one of the official investigators, should never turn out to be the culprit. This is bald trickery, on a par with offering some one a bright penny for a five-dollar gold piece. It's false pretenses.

5. The culprit must be determined by logical deductions – not by accident or coincidence or unmotivated confession. To solve a criminal problem in this latter fashion is like sending the reader on a deliberate wild-goose chase, and then telling him, after he has failed, that you had the object of his search up your sleeve all the time. Such an author is no better than a practical joker.

6. The detective novel must have a detective in it; and a detective is not a detective unless he detects. His function is to gather clues that will eventually lead to the person who did the dirty work in the first chapter; and if the detective does not reach his conclusions through an analysis of those clues, he has no more solved his problem than the schoolboy who gets his answer out of the back of the arithmetic.

7. There simply must be a corpse in a detective novel, and the deader the corpse the better. No lesser crime than murder will suffice. Three hundred pages is far too much pother for a crime other than murder. After all, the reader's trouble and expenditure of energy must be rewarded.

8. The problem of the crime must be solved by strictly naturalistic means. Such methods for learning the truth as slate-writing, ouija-boards, mind-reading, spiritualistic séances, crystal-gazing, and the like, are taboo. A reader has a chance when matching his wits with a rationalistic detective, but if he must compete with the world of spirits and go chasing about the fourth dimension of metaphysics, he is defeated *ab initio*.

9. There must be but one detective – that is, but one protagonist of deduction – one *deus ex machina*. To bring the minds of three or four, or sometimes a gang of detectives to bear on a problem, is not only to disperse the interest and break the direct thread of logic, but to take an unfair advantage of the reader. If there is more than one detective the reader doesn't know who his co-deductor is. It's like making the reader run a race with a relay team.

10. The culprit must turn out to be a person who has played a more or less prominent part in the story – that is, a person with whom the reader is familiar and in whom he takes an interest.

11. A servant must not be chosen by the author as the culprit. This is begging a noble question. It is a too easy solution. The culprit must be a decidedly worth-while person – one that wouldn't ordinarily come under suspicion.

12. There must be but one culprit, no matter how many murders are committed. The culprit may, of course, have a minor helper or co-plotter; but the entire onus must rest on one pair of shoulders: the entire indignation of the reader must be permitted to concentrate on a single black nature.

13. Secret societies, camorras, mafias, *et al.*, have no place in a detective story. A fascinating and truly beautiful murder is irremediably spoiled by any such wholesale culpability. To be sure, the murderer in a detective novel should be given a sporting chance; but it is going too far to grant

him a secret society to fall back on. No high-class, self-respecting murderer would want such odds.

14. The method of murder, and the means of detecting it, must be rational and scientific. That is to say, pseudo-science and purely imaginative and speculative devices are not to be tolerated in the *roman policier*. Once an author soars into the realm of fantasy, in the Jules Verne manner, he is outside the bounds of detective fiction, cavorting in the uncharted reaches of adventure.

15. The truth of the problem must at all times be apparent – provided the reader is shrewd enough to see it. By this I mean that if the reader, after learning the explanation for the crime, should reread the book, he would see that the solution had, in a sense, been staring him in the face—that all the clues really pointed to the culprit – and that, if he had been as clever as the detective, he could have solved the mystery himself without going on to the final chapter. That the clever reader does often thus solve the problem goes without saying.

16. A detective novel should contain no long descriptive passages, no literary dallying with side-issues, no subtly worked-out character analyses, no “atmospheric” preoccupations. Such matters have no vital place in a record of crime and deduction. They hold up the action and introduce issues irrelevant to the main purpose, which is to state a problem, analyze it, and bring it to a successful conclusion. To be sure, there must be a sufficient descriptiveness and character delineation to give the novel verisimilitude.

17. A professional criminal must never be shouldered with the guilt of a crime in a detective story. Crimes by housebreakers and bandits are the province of the police departments – not of authors and brilliant amateur detectives. A really fascinating crime is one committed by a pillar of a church, or a spinster noted for her charities.

18. A crime in a detective story must never turn out to be an accident or a suicide. To end an odyssey of sleuthing with such an anti-climax is to hoodwink the trusting and kind-hearted reader.

19. The motives for all crimes in detective stories should be personal. International plottings and war politics belong in a different category of fiction — in secret-service tales, for instance. But a murder story must be kept *gemuetlich*, so to speak. It must reflect the reader’s everyday experiences, and give him a certain outlet for his own repressed desires and emotions.

20. And (to give my Credo an even score of items) I herewith list a few of the devices which no self-respecting detective story writer will now avail himself of. They have been employed too often, and are familiar to all true lovers of literary crime. To use them is a confession of the author’s ineptitude and lack of originality. (a) Determining the identity of the culprit by comparing the butt of a cigarette left at the scene of the crime with the brand smoked by a suspect. (b) The bogus spiritualistic séance to frighten the culprit into giving himself away. (c) Forged fingerprints. (d) The dummy-figure alibi. (e) The dog that does not bark and thereby reveals the fact that the intruder is familiar. (f) The final pinning of the crime on a twin, or a relative who looks exactly like the suspected, but innocent, person. (g) The hypodermic syringe and the knockout drops. (h) The commission of the murder in a locked room after the police have actually broken in. (i) The word association test for guilt. (j) The cipher, or code letter, which is eventually unraveled by the sleuth.

Source: Van Dine, S.S.. 1946. “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories,” in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Grosset & Dunlap), pp. 189-193.

Annex C. “A Detective Story Decalogue” by Ronald A. Knox [abridged]

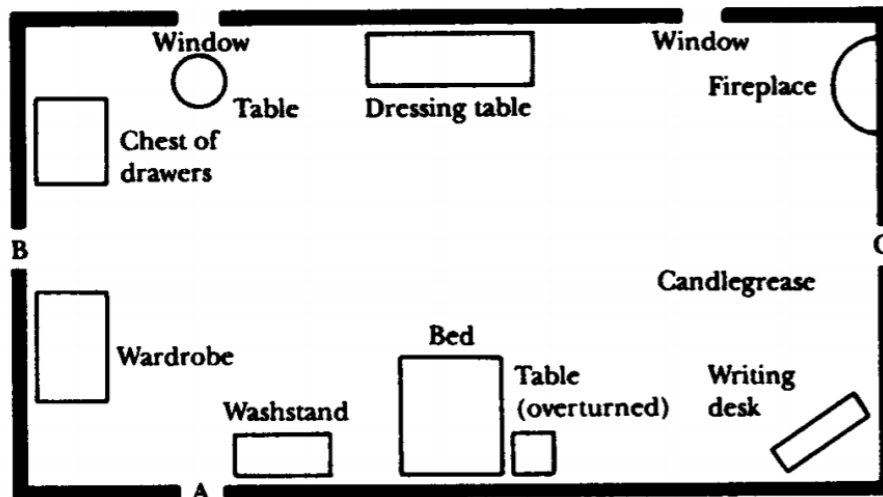
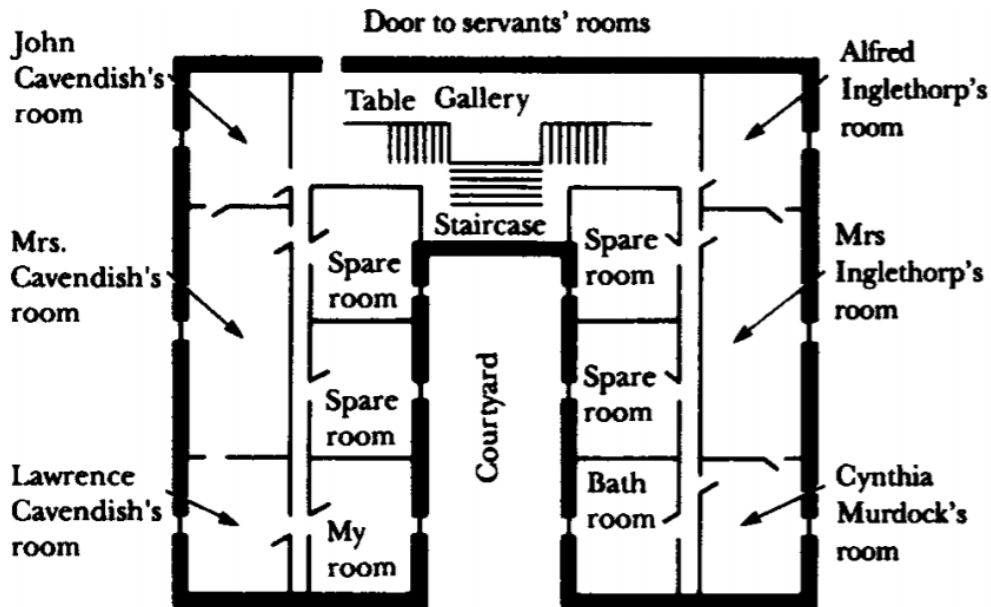
- I. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
- II. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
- III. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
- IV. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
- V. No Chinaman must figure in the story.⁵⁹
- VI. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
- VII. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
- VIII. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
- IX. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal from the reader any thoughts which pass through his mind: his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
- X. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

Source: Knox, Ronald A. 1946. “A Detective Story Decalogue,” in *The Art of the Mystery Story*, ed. Howard Haycraft (New York: Grosset & Dunlap), pp. 194-196.

⁵⁹ “This comment is not as racist as it may first appear. At the time of its writing Orientals in fiction were perceived as the personification of everything undesirable and came under the general heading of ‘The Yellow Peril.’ [...] [T]he white-slave trade, torture and other ‘unspeakable acts’ were the accepted fictional norms at the time for any character of Oriental extraction. This Rule was included to raise the literary horizon above that of the average opium den.” John Curran, *Agatha Christie: Murder in the Making* (New York: Harper Collins, 2011) 60.

Annex D. Maps from *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* and *Murder in Mesopotamia*

Annex D1: diagrams of Styles Court

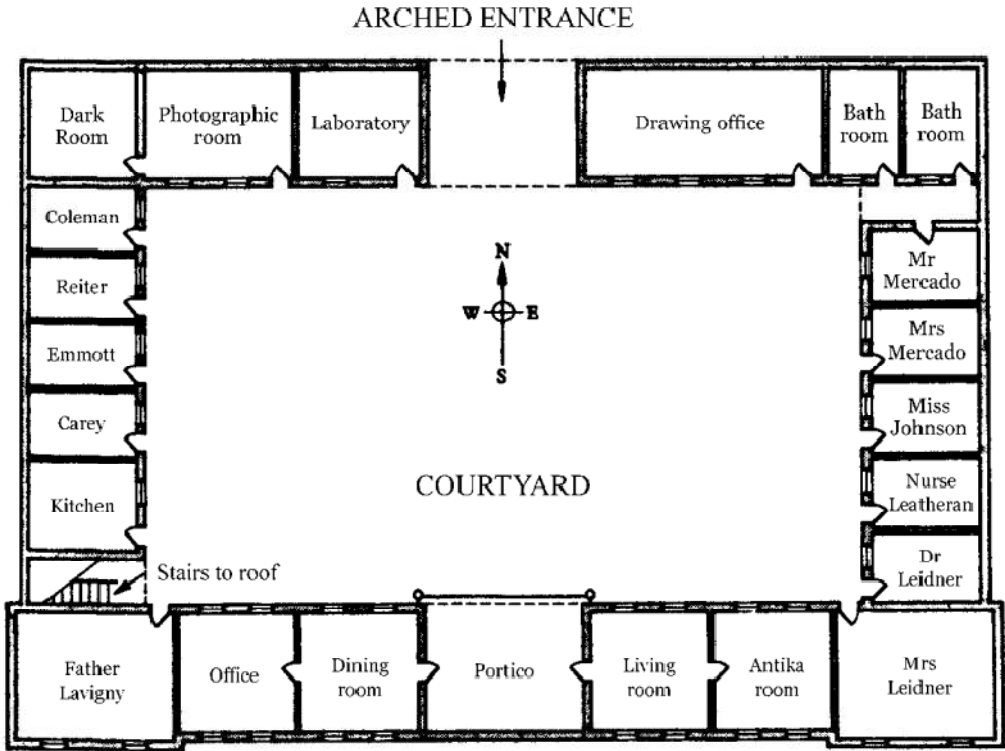


MRS. INGLETHORP'S BEDROOM

- A - Door into passage
- B - Door into Mr. Inglethorp's room
- C - Door into Cynthia's room

Source: Christie, Agatha. [1921] 2007. *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (London: HarperCollins), p. 43, p. 62.

Annex D2: diagram of the expedition house



Plan of the expedition house at Tell Yarimjah

Source: Christie, Agatha. [1936] 2001. *Murder in Mesopotamia* (London: HarperCollins), p. 42.

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Abstract

This *mémoire* examines a particular technique, called the closed circle of suspects, used in Agatha Christie's detective novels. This method consists of using a confined setting as a crime scene in order to delineate a restricted group of suspects among which the murderer can be found. This raises the question of the relationship between spatial enclosure and social enclosure in these works, and notably how these two archetypes, seemingly so distinct, can complement each other. By analysing six of Christie's closed circle mysteries, this *mémoire* aims at showing that Christie gave unprecedented psychoanalytical depth to what was merely supposed to be a convenient writing strategy, and turned it into a grim social commentary. Christie's closed circle mysteries are a Gothic-like literature of social and psychological terror, in which – despite the apparent happy ending – the process of spatial enclosure only highlights that the threats to social order always come from inside society itself.

Key words: Agatha Christie, enclosure, detective fiction, murder mystery, Gothic literature, psychoanalytic criticism, literary criticism, English literature, setting, social critique.

Résumé

Ce mémoire examine une technique particulière, dite du cercle clos de suspects, utilisée dans les romans policiers d'Agatha Christie. Cette méthode consiste à utiliser un décor restreint en guise de scène de crime, dans le but de démarquer un groupe limité de suspects au sein duquel se trouve le meurtrier. Ce procédé soulève la question de la relation entre clôture spatiale et clôture sociale dans ces romans, et notamment de la façon dont ces deux modèles de clôture, en apparence si distincts, peuvent se compléter l'un l'autre. À travers l'analyse de six huis clos d'Agatha Christie, ce mémoire cherche à démontrer que Christie a su donner une profondeur psychanalytique inédite à ce qui n'était censé être qu'une stratégie d'écriture à but purement pratique, pour en faire une critique sociale aussi sévère que sinistre. Les mystères en cercle clos de Christie constituent une littérature de terreur sociale et psychologique à l'évocation gothique, dans laquelle – en dépit d'une fin heureuse – le procédé de clôture spatiale ne parvient qu'à souligner que les menaces à l'ordre social proviennent toujours de l'intérieur même de la société.

Mots-clés : Agatha Christie, huis clos, roman policier, roman d'énigme, littérature gothique, critique psychanalytique, critique littéraire, littérature anglaise, décor, critique sociale.