

Ingrid Bjørnstad

"The devilish expression lacking"

A study of Agatha Christie`s Cards on the Table

Masteroppgave i Allmenn litteraturvitenskap

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Abstract

Crime fiction is a genre about crimes and their investigation. Often, the crime in question is murder. Crime fiction is an inherently moral genre, in which justice prevails. This thesis will explore whether criminal characters are punished through the narrative, and how a crime fiction narrative treat a victim who has also committed a crime? This question can be especially interesting in *Cards on the Table*, a crime fiction novel by Agatha Christie in which all of the victims have themselves committed crime. This reading of the novel finds that criminal victims are punished via murder, but that, prior to this, they are sympathetically portrayed. This leads to the identification of four major moral themes: forgiveness, hubris, hypocrisy and justice.

Sammendrag

Kriminallitteratur er en sjanger om forbrytelser og deres oppklaring. Forbrytelsen i kriminallitteratur er ofte mord. Kriminalsjangeren er en iboende moralsk sjanger hvor rettferdigheten seirer til slutt. Denne masterundersøkelsen utforsker om kriminelle karakterer blir straffet i narrativet, og hvordan et krimnarrativ behandler et offer som også har begått kriminalitet? Dette spørsmålet kan være spesielt interessant i *Cards on the Table*, en kriminalroman av Agatha Christie hvor alle ofrene har begått en form for kriminalitet. Denne lesningen av romanen finner at kriminelle ofre er straffet for sin kriminalitet via mord. Forut for dette blir kriminelle ofre oftest sympatisk fremstilt. Lesningen finner også fire moralske temaer: tilgivelse, hybris, hykleri og rettferdighet.

Preface

My interest in crime fiction began when I was introduced to the Nancy Drew series by Carolyn Keen. The mysteries were thrilling, and I enjoyed attempting to deduce who the criminal might be. I also enjoyed Nancy Drew herself who is both a feminine high school girl that adores shopping and gossip, but who also is an intelligent detective who solves every mystery she is handed. I admired her courage especially and this series paved the way for my later interest in Agatha Christie's crime fiction.

I first encountered Agatha Christie's crime fiction through the film adaptations of her work, with David Suchet as Hercule Poirot. The series introduced me to a universe that was both intriguing and suspenseful, but at the same time humanist and compassionate. But this impression changed when I watched the adaptation of *Cards on the Table*. Alexander Siddig's portrayal of Shaitana is a relentlessly cruel character who hurts people almost out of spite while Hercule Poirot becomes angry and almost terrifying in his rage against him. This impression is further enhanced by the portrayal of Dr. Roberts as a poor tortured soul who does not have a choice but to be criminal because of his homosexuality. I began the work of this thesis because I wanted to examine whether the novel took the same approach and to my surprise the portrayal of Shaitana is more humanist and sympathetic and at the same time he is a thoroughly enjoyable character because of his unpredictability.

I would also like to thank a few people. First, I would like to thank my supervisors for their love and support. A huge thank you to Turi Marte Brandt Ånerud for your assistance, both through the master thesis workshop and the private support that you gave given me. I would like to thank the leaders in my study program association for allowing me to be part of the social and academic environment of the institute. I would like to thank Kristin Fridtun for their grammatical assistance and Sunniva Fossly for her medical assistance. I want to thank Jasmine Rishimawi for her assistance with the Arabic translation. I would like to thank Kristin Strandheim and Karen Langsholdt Holmkvist for allowing me to eat lunch with them. I would like to thank everyone I have been sitting in the study hall with and lastly my family.

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Introduction

Crime fiction is a widely popular genre of literary entertainment, which is very often centered on one main key element: namely, violence. This strong focus on violence, or other kinds of criminal action, on placing guilt, on justice and retribution, certainly puts moral questions at the heart of the very genre of crime fiction itself. Morality, however, has not been a major focus of the scholarship on this kind of literature.¹ Is crime fiction an amoral genre, in the sense that it is a genre that is not concerned with morality? Is it a genre that presents crime and violence only as a kind of entertainment, placing discussions on moral questions to one side? Or can one identify moral structures and engagement with problems that are discussed from a moral point of view? If there are moral elements, do these convey moral stands, or do they simply present general moral problems, without analyzing them and without taking clear positions?

These questions are especially interesting with regard to Agatha Christie’s crime fiction. Christie is one of the most renowned crime fiction writers in modern times, known for complex characters and intricate plots. She is also doubtless one of the most representative authors for British crime fiction from the 1920s and 30s, partly because she was an upper-middle-class woman. According to John Scaggs, many of the British crime fiction writers in the 1920s and 30s were female writers with this kind of background, Dorothy Sayers and Ngaio Marsh being prominent examples².

The following pages will investigate the moral aspects of crime fiction by discussing one of Christie’s most important novels, *Cards on the Table*. Morality, here, will not be tied to a specific writer of moral essays or to a given moral philosopher. It will not be discussed from a religious or juridical perspective. The purpose of this examination is not to enter into discussions on the nature of morality, on specific definitions of what is moral in various traditions or philosophical schools. Rather, what will be discussed in this thesis is the set of moral themes that occurs in the fictional universe of *Cards on the Table*. The nature of the moral issues that will be commented upon will therefore be identified through the text itself. Morality, in this sense, is interesting in Christie’s writing because it can be interpreted in many different ways. Instead of one message, presented as the only moral perspective, one could argue that the narrative presents a variety of moral themes.

¹ There is no current research on morality in crime fiction

² Scaggs, 2005:19

Research question

Our main research question is “how are criminal victims portrayed in moral terms in *Cards on the Table*?”. This question engages with a number of issues. First, it relates to the important question of the punishment which is implied in almost all similar crime fiction stories. When one considers that criminals are often condemned, especially in early crime fiction, and often condemned to death sentence in particular, this opens up potentially crucial moral debates³. The question also concerns the very place of morality in Christie’s works, since the onus in most of her novels can be said to be placed on entertainment⁴. How do these two elements, the entertainment purpose of literature, and moral investigation, relate to each other? The focus on entertainment can become especially clear in *Cards on the Table*, which is about the murder of a character called Shaitana, who is killed during a game of bridge. Because of this setting, large portions of the investigation and narrative in *Cards on the Table* are not directly concerned with moral questions, but rather with the game of bridge itself – a focus which epitomizes this very contrast between morals and games⁵.

As further questions one could, for instance, ask how crime is portrayed through the victims in *Cards on the Table*. Is a tendency towards crime an inherent trait in the character, or is crime a consequence of the negative circumstances that the characters may face? One could discuss how moral issues are portrayed in the victims as well, if a victim is consistently depicted as having a particular inherent moral personality, or if the morality of the characters changes throughout the narrative.

Another question that follows on from these initial ones is that of how these moral themes relate to the characters. If one could identify more than one moral theme, there would be an argument for the idea that the various moral themes can be connected to each of the victims in different ways. There could also be an argument for the idea that different moral issues may affect the individual victims differently.

Is there more than one dominating moral perspective in the narrative? If there is more than one main moral perspective, one may investigate whether other moral perspectives develop with regard to the main theme.

³ Scaggs 2005; Cawelti, 1977:20-24

⁴ Bargainnier, 1980:5-13

⁵ Christie, 2010

How can one identify such moral themes in *Cards on the Table*? One possibility is to analyze the overarching narrative; another is to scrutinize the characters themselves. Interesting features are often found in the interconnection between the two, particularly as regards choices the victims make and the consequences they face.

Can one argue that the gender of the victim has implications for the moral themes that are portrayed in *Cards on the Table*? Can one identify differences in the moral themes that are explored when the onus is on a female victim and the moral themes that are explored when the narrative focuses on a male victim? This gender difference may be significant when it comes to analyzing how the moral themes may affect the victims and vice versa. The gender difference may also explain differences in the portrayals of the victims themselves.

In order to approach the main question and the related sub questions, this thesis will focus on the literary representation of the victims in Christie’s fiction and how the portrayal of those victims raises moral problems and issues.

Scholarly approaches

Crime fiction is not exceptional as a research area. However, the majority of the research on crime fiction concerns the genre itself, together with its subgenres. Most scholarship focuses on the structure of the texts and on how suspense is built up. Earl F. Bargainnier has written a study focusing specifically on Agatha Christie’s fiction⁶. There is, in fact, little research on the topic of criminal victims in crime fiction and when this topic has been studied, it has been studied in film noir, which is a movie genre based on a different subgenre of crime fiction, with a focus on action, corruption and organized crime. Moral issues remain to be studied in the work of Christie.

Four different perspectives underpin the approaches in the present work. The first of these theoretical perspectives is psychoanalysis. Psychoanalysis can be seen as a research field that examines the human psyche in literature and how the human psyche is portrayed in characters in literature. The second theoretical perspective is the structural perspective, which examines how a novel is constructed, in structural terms. The third theoretical perspective is feminism, which mainly looks at how women are portrayed in literature. The fourth theoretical perspective is queer theory, which examines how non-heterosexual characters are portrayed in literature.

⁶ Bargainnier, 1980

In the category of psychoanalysis, the works of John Lechte provide a main reference. He focuses on how characters that inhabit more than one role in the narrative are portrayed. His main focus is on crime fiction narratives from the movie genre of film noir. Lechte’s works especially explore how characters who inhabit more than one role in crime fiction narratives are portrayed when their roles are conflicted⁷. The second reference is Julia Kristeva, who explores how the human psyche reacts to discomfort in literature⁸. The third main reference drawn on here will be Hela Pyrrhonen, who examines how morality is portrayed through detective characters in crime fiction⁹.

In the category of feminism, the works of Elisabeth Bronfen provide a point of departure. She examines film noir and how the genre portrays women who have committed crimes¹⁰. Merja Makinen is a feminist theoretician who has studied how female characters are portrayed in Christie’s crime fiction. Makinen also examines how Christie’s female characters differ from other female characters in crime fiction from the same time period¹¹.

A key reference will be the works of Judith Butler, who explores how gender has been created and how that affects society’s view of differing sexual orientations and gender identities¹². Matthew Woodbridge, on the other hand, examines how male homosexuals are portrayed in British theatre in the 1700s¹³, with conclusions that are highly relevant when it comes to the portrayals of homosexuals that can be found in crime fiction from the 1930s.

When it comes to narrative structure, the Aristotelian model is crucial to crime fiction, and those issues will be related to basic Aristotelian principles¹⁴. Structure-related discussions will also build on Dennis Porter, who examines how suspense in crime fiction novels relate to Greek tragedy¹⁵. Tzvetan Todorov studies the structure of crime fiction novels and the balance between investigation and the explanation of the murder in and of itself, and his conclusions will prove useful in the examinations of the narrative structures in Christie’s novels¹⁶.

The thesis is based on a combination of three main approaches. The first is the analysis of the victims as characters. The second approach focuses on generic features of Christie’s form of crime fiction. The third approach centers on analysis of the narrative structures in the novel.

⁷ Lechte, 2010

⁸ Kristeva, 1982

⁹ Pyrrhonen, 1999

¹⁰ Bronfen, 2010

¹¹ Makinen, 1999

¹² Butler, 1990

¹³ Woodbridge, 1997

¹⁴ Aristotle, 2007

¹⁵ Porter, 1991

¹⁶ Todorov, 1991

Theoretical aspects relating to the scholarship underpinning these three main approaches will be discussed where relevant.

The thesis is divided into four chapters. The first chapter explores the different views on moral themes presented throughout the history of crime fiction. The second discusses moral ambiguity through an analysis of the main characters. The third chapter examines the different crimes, motivations and moral stands that emerge from this moral ambiguity. The fourth chapter analyses the narrative consequences created by moral ambiguity.

Chapter 1: moral values in Christie’s crime fiction

The relations between crime fiction and moral values can be seen as quite complicated. One approach to crime fiction can be to analyze the phenomenon as entertainment. This approach tends to ignore the fact that the crime fiction genre cannot be seen as only one genre. Carl D Malmgren argues that there are three different subgenres within the crime fiction genre. The first subgenre is the so-called *whodunit*, which has a clear central setting, one murder and one murderer¹⁷. The second subgenre is the hardboiled crime story, which follows a detective who solves a crime while fighting against corruption and organized crime¹⁸. The third subgenre is called the crime novel, and it differs from the two first subgenres in several ways. Instead of following a detective, the crime novel usually follows a criminal. The goal in a crime fiction novel is rarely to stop the criminal from committing a crime¹⁹. According to John Scaggs, there is also a fourth genre that can be counted as a subgenre within crime fiction and that is the ‘police procedural’. The ‘police procedural’ follows a police officer investigating a crime²⁰. Since the four subgenres of crime fiction can be read as quite different from each other, it can be difficult to say definitively whether or not it can be reduced to a genre made purely for entertainment. In this chapter, I shall examine the four different subgenres of crime fiction and their relationship to moral values.

Entertainment and morality

Is crime fiction pure entertainment or is it a moral story? The first stories that can be read as crime fiction, first published in the eighteenth century, are clearly related to moral issues. These stories were collected in various anthologies that were sold to the public. The first of these collections was *The Newgate calendar*, which was published in 1773²¹. These texts can be read as early crime novels because they follow the criminal, but they could also serve as warnings for the readers, with an often explicit moral message. The texts in *The Newgate calendar* depict the crimes of the characters and how the criminals were captured and punished²². Therefore, these stories can be read as a form of crime prevention. Scaggs argues that they may have been created to prevent crime because the focus is on the themes of crime, capture and punishment, and not on crime fiction as an entertainment story.

¹⁷ Malmgren, 2001:18

¹⁸ Malmgren, 2001:18

¹⁹ Malmgren, 2001:18

²⁰ Scaggs, 2005:13-15

²¹ Scaggs, 2005:12-13

²² Scaggs, 2005:12-13

A literary work that may be read as an early crime fiction novel with elements of entertainment is *Caleb Williams*, which was written in 1793 by William Goodwin²³. The title character is framed for a murder he did not commit, by his boss and by the genuine murderer, Falkland²⁴. While this novel can be read as an entertaining story and a predecessor to the hard-boiled crime genre, it can also be read as a criticism of the feudal system. The entertainment and crime narrative are the primary focus in this novel and the criticism can be read as secondary. Therefore, this novel can also be read as a predecessor of the crime fiction genre in the time period between the two World Wars. These years, when the genre became hugely popular, are often referred to as the ‘golden age’ of crime fiction. It was also widely seen as an entertainment genre in this period²⁵. Even though *Caleb Williams* was written in the eighteenth century, there are entertainment elements that mirror the crime fiction genre of the twentieth century. One example is that the murder can be a puzzle to be solved, instead of something tragic that calls for punishment. Unlike *The Newgate calendar*, *Caleb Williams* does not describe the murderer’s capture and punishment. The two different works also explore different themes. *The Newgate calendar* presents themes of crime, justice and punishment, while the themes of *Caleb Williams* can be read as dichotomies. One thematic dichotomy in *Caleb Williams* is the contrast between innocence and guilt. Another is that between justice and injustice.

The moral aspects of both of these early crime fiction narratives appear through the ways in which they explore crime, and efforts to prevent it. *The Newgate calendar* tries to warn readers against crime by detailing how all criminals are captured and punished. *Caleb Williams* instead depicts how crime can stem from an unjust societal system: in this case, the feudal system. However, at the same time, *Caleb Williams* also resembles the crime fiction from the interwar period because it presents the murder as a puzzle to solve. *The Newgate calendar* sees crime as a negative and tragic element of life that needs to be avoided. The moral message is clear: characters, and in consequence the readers, run the risk of being arrested and punished for any crimes they have committed.

Class and morality

Class can emerge as a key element in understanding the moral values of crime fiction. In 1886 Arthur Conan Doyle published *A study in scarlet*, in which he introduces the character of

²³ Scaggs, 2005:13-14

²⁴ Scaggs, 2005:13-14

²⁵ Scaggs, 2005:19-26

Sherlock Holmes, who investigates the murders of Enoch J Drebber and John Ransfield²⁶. Holmes discovers that the murders have been committed by Jefferson Hope, who drives a horse-drawn cab. The characters’ professions become relevant, in that those professions contribute to showing how class is portrayed, and, more importantly, how morality is portrayed as something related to class. Sherlock Holmes, Doctor Watson, and other characters can both be read as upper middle class: Holmes, because he is a student²⁷; Drebber, because he can afford both living in a hotel and employing an assistant. Ransfield and Hope, on the other hand, can both be seen as working class. Ransfield works as an assistant and Hope is the driver of a horse-drawn cab²⁸. Clearly, class is an important component of Doyle’s narrative. The focus on social levels can be interpreted as translating the idea that criminal offences can occur regardless of class. Thus, one could argue that the moral question is presented independently of class, and that this implies that crime could happen to anyone. This message is enhanced by the fact that Holmes cooperates with beggars²⁹.

Christie’s somewhat later crime fiction shifts the attention from the hierarchical class structure of society typical of the works of Doyle to an examination focusing on the upper middle class. Indeed, Earl F Bargainnier argues that she was herself a representative of this very same social category³⁰. In fact, almost all major characters in Christie’s fiction can be read as members of the upper middle class. When Christie portrays working-class people, it is almost always as servants, often without a strong role in the narrative. They can often be read as comic relief, because their character traits are dominated by humorous elements. However, even though these characters are portrayed with humor, their testimonies are believed and taken seriously. Nonetheless, they fail to establish a coherent and almost dialectical class system in which characters from different classes are systematically opposed, as is seen in Doyle’s works. Christie’s servant characters can also be antagonistic. In such cases, they are portrayed as criminals who need to be prevented from committing crime. It can be argued that servant characters in Christie’s novels are either comic relief, nonexistent or a force that the detective characters should stop.

While Conan Doyle focuses on a hierarchical view of society and class, to show how moral values can be distributed throughout the social classes, Christie’s narratives tend to confine the moral discussion to the upper middle class. Doyle’s presentation of class diversity

²⁶ Conan Doyle, 2008

²⁷ Conan Doyle, 2008

²⁸ Conan Doyle, 2008

²⁹ Conan Doyle, 2008

³⁰ Bargainnier, 1980:13

can strengthen the notion that Doyle’s fiction is centered around moral values. Doyle portrays more characters across classes, even though the protagonists represent the middle class. Doyle’s characters are more representative of the reality of their context, and their class plays a greater role than it does in Christie’s fictional universe. Sherlock Holmes is presented as a gentleman who collaborates with other characters regardless of class. This approach can also be seen as a complex continuation of the explicit moral purpose seen in eighteenth century crime fiction. It postulates that anyone can help in preventing crime.

Christie’s approach to class in crime fiction can be read as confined to the upper middle class. According to Bargainnier, the upper middle class can also be seen as Christie’s target audience – a fact that could explain why most of Christie’s characters can be seen as representatives of this social level. The focus on the upper middle class, in turn, can lead to the working class being seen as almost nonexistent, or at least less relevant. Furthermore, class is rarely problematized. This may be seen in relation to the fact that Christie’s main crime fiction subgenre is first and foremost created for entertainment purposes³¹. Christie’s approach to moral values can therefore be read as rather different to Doyle’s. Her fiction has a primary focus on entertainment. Compared with Doyle, the moral aspects and values of her novels, although present, shift from the primary focus that we see in Doyle’s text to a secondary focus in her novels.

Implied moral values

Are the moral values of Agatha Christie implied or explicit? In Doyle’s *A study in scarlet*, Drebber and Ransfield are killed by the character Hope because they were implicated in the murder of Hope’s girlfriend. She was killed together with her father when they attempted to escape the Mormons. The escape attempt was initiated by Hope because he wanted to save his girlfriend from being married to either Ransfield or Drebber³². Therefore, the motivation for the murder can be read as revenge. Hope is also dying³³ – a fact entailing the explicit moral message in *A study in scarlet* that revenge and murder are destructive and wrong.

Christie’s *Cards on the table* does not have such a clear moral message. The victims were murdered because they threatened the murderer’s social status as a doctor³⁴. The novel can be read as a whodunit, as can many of Christie’s works; it was a genre that she arguably

³¹ Scaggs, 2005:19-26

³² Conan Doyle, 2008

³³ Conan Doyle, 2008

³⁴ Christie, 2010:565-582

helped in establishing and greatly contributed to. Cawelti argues that the whodunit is inherently moral, in that it is a moral fantasy in which justice always is served³⁵. But instead of having a clear moral message, like Doyle, Christie can be said to explore different moral themes. Like Doyle, Christie may present moral dilemmas, but she rarely gives clear answers to these moral questions. And instead of delivering a new moral message in each novel, as Doyle tends to do, Christie instead explores similar moral themes throughout her novels.

Christie’s approach can seem more familiar to modern audiences, because the direct delivery of moral messages, in the style of Doyle, would seem old fashioned in modern crime fiction. Doyle, on the other hand, gives a clearer moral answer which can be easier for readers to decipher. Doyle’s moral messages are easier for the reader to take to heart, while Christie instead allows her readers to ponder over the moral issues that might be involved. Since moral values are not seen as a primary focus in the whodunit, they are not easily spotted, and call for interpretation in order to be noticed. When, as in Doyle, the moral is clearly in the forefront of the narrative, the entertainment effect may be diminished. The mystery turns to a moral lesson. But at the same time, these moral principles that are presented to the reader may have a more effective impact. The moral message is easily detected by the reader and may apply in his or her daily life. Christie, by contrast, fleshes out the puzzle aspect of the whodunit genre to add extra momentum to its entertainment elements. This makes the novel more engaging and creates an escapist puzzle story; however, it blurs the moral aspect even more as compared to earlier crime fiction, as for instance when Doyle, with a rather different approach to developing the narrative, uses a realistic backstory to flesh out Hope as more than a simple murderous antagonist.

Thus, both Doyle and Christie’s crime fiction can read as narratives that wish to convey moral values; however, they do so in very different ways. These differences partly stem from the characteristics of the genres they employ. The early police procedural is for instance based on the utopian idea that crime can be prevented through literature³⁶. Therefore, it could be argued that Doyle’s fictional universe actually *intends* to be explicitly moral. The idea of crime prevention can especially be seen in the clear moral messages that are stated in a direct manner to the reader. Christie’s genre, the whodunit, is characterized by a completely different aim, linked to escapism. Therefore, the moral lesson cannot be a primary feature in the same way as in the early police procedural. However, Christie’s fictional universe certainly does imply some moral themes and dilemmas, that call for more attentive reading.

³⁵ Cawelti, 1977:22-24

³⁶ Scaggs, 2005:8-12

Crime fiction and religion

Do the moral values in *Cards on the table* have a religious or a humanist foundation? Christian values were closely related to the development of crime fiction in the interwar period. In 1929, Roland Knox helped to found a detection club with Anthony Berkeley Cox. Knox also established ten rules for good detective fiction. He partially based these rules on the Catholic faith, because he himself was both a crime fiction writer and a Catholic priest. Knox can be credited with initiating the so-called ‘principle of fair play’, which is the notion that both the readers and the detective characters should have the same opportunity to solve the crime puzzle³⁷.

One year earlier, in 1928, SS van Dine published the essay *Twenty rules for good detective fiction*, which can be read as a predecessor to the fair play principle launched by Knox. Like Knox, SS van Dine was also a crime fiction writer, van Dine being a pseudonym for Willard Huntington Wright. Similarly to Knox, he was seen as a founder of and theoretician within the genre of whodunits³⁸. But by contrast with Knox, he was not religious. His teachings on detective stories are rooted in humanist values, such as justice.

A writer that can most certainly be counted as religious was GK Chesterton. Like Knox, he was a Catholic priest writing crime fiction alongside his ministry. His detective character, Father Brown, is also a Catholic priest. Chesterton uses moral principles drawn from the Bible to judge characters, especially the suspects and murderers. Father Brown’s interrogations sometimes resemble confessions in the way in which he tries to convince the suspected characters to own up to crimes that they may have committed. Cawelti argues that these kinds of crime fiction narratives can be seen as religious fantasies, in which the detective becomes a savior who rescues the stable universe from moral disruption. The disturbing element is usually represented by a murderer, while the redeeming moment occurs when the murderer is arrested. The detective in the savior role may also save innocent characters from false conviction through their intellectual talents³⁹.

Consequently, Christie cannot be counted as a creator of a detective in a savior role. Hercule Poirot, one of her most renowned detective characters, famously judges the characters and appears as a stronghold of stable principles. In this respect he does continue the moral role of the detective established in the earlier Catholic tradition. However, his judgments are almost always based on humanist principles and law, and not on religious or Christian foundations. It

³⁷ Scaggs, 2005:26-28

³⁸ Scaggs, 2005:8-20

³⁹ Cawelti, 1977:22-24

could be argued in Cawelti’s terms that Christie’s whodunits embody more of a moral fantasy than a religious one, because Hercule Poirot simply makes sure that justice is served. He does not necessarily rid the world of evil in a metaphorical sense. In some sense, religion can be seen as a factor in the narrative, for instance when hypocrisy appears as a moral theme. This, however, is more a question of humanist moral principles overlapping with Christian values than of Poirot approaching the role of a Catholic priest.

Even though both GK Chesterton and Christie use religious elements, GK Chesterton is far more explicit. His detective is clearly established as a religious figure through his profession as a priest. Father Brown also tries to rid his stable fictional universe of evil through his detection, making the narrative into a religious project in itself. This results in an efficient parallel between the religious realm and the organizing features of the crime narrative, in which the detective represents good and the criminal represents evil⁴⁰.

Nevertheless, even though Christie’s novels mark a clear movement away from the Catholic version of crime fiction and the realm of Father Brown, the religious aspect never really entirely disappears. One could argue that religion is still linked with morals in Christie’s novels, although in different ways. The attentive reader will see that religious themes certainly do appear in her works, such as in *Cards on the table*, but that they are implied, and that they emerge on a much more discreet level. One example of this is the appearance in the novel of the idea of evilness, which is often referred to through religious references. Thus, for example, the victim in *Cards on the table* is called ‘Shaitana’, which is the Arabic term for the Devil. Shaitana is also known for dressing up as Mephistopheles, the famous character of the vicious Devil in Goethe’s *Faust*⁴¹. Another implied religious element in *Cards on the table* appears in the final scene between Hercule Poirot and the murderer. The whole scene is played out as a confession, with Poirot taking on the role of the priest⁴². These religious themes are most certainly present, but they are not made apparent on an explicit level. Thus, the religious themes being implied are not consistent. Whereas some of the character’s names are religious, such as Anne, which means ‘grace’, some of the names are of Greek origin, some are Celtic and some cannot be said to have any significance.

This approach in Christie’s works is very different from GK Chesterton’s, in which the religious themes are not only prominent but also consistent throughout his entire output. In the novels about Father Brown, the theme is not necessarily shown in the names but in the fact that

⁴⁰ Cawelti, 1977:22-24

⁴¹ Goethe, 2009

⁴² Christie, 2010:565-582

the protagonist is not only a priest, but also a priest that talks to other priests, which is at the forefront of the narratives. These stories also concern Christian themes, such as directly restoring someone’s faith or showing them to be less than faithful. Pyrhönen argues that one of the characteristics of the whodunit is the mirroring of the murderer, or showing the murderer that they are unlike the detective. She further argues that this is a technique used by GK Chesterton to show how Father Brown differs from a thieving priest. At the same time, this mirroring technique highlights the similarities between the detective and the murderer: in this case, the fact that they are both priests. The highlighting of these similarities is what Pyrhönen calls ‘I-am-you’, whereas finding the differences in the mirror image of these two characters is what Pyrhönen calls the ‘I-am-not-you’⁴³. Therefore, showing religion in a more negative or neutral light and giving a focus to hypocrisy within the Catholic church can be counted as a theme in Chesterton’s crime fiction.

Even though she does so differently from Chesterton, Christie also mobilizes religious themes in her whodunits. Chesterton tends to use quite explicit religious themes throughout his narratives. Thus, the question of moral values is usually closely linked to religion. According to Pyrhönen, Father Brown also tends to mirror the religious and moral values of his suspects in order to arrest the guilty criminal. In addition, according to Cawelti’s terms, Chesterton’s crime fiction can be counted as a religious fantasy, because the whole work appears, on a general level, as an extended metaphor about a savior ridding the stable fictional universe of a disrupting evil threat⁴⁴.

On a thematic level, the idea of hypocrisy itself materializes as one of the most prominent religious problems, because it is so closely related to the Christian tradition, in which hypocrisy is a major problem that religions can struggle with. As for the names linked to religion, these themes cannot be considered consistent. Some of them may be seen as symbolic and ironic, some of them as simply symbolic, while others can seem quite randomly chosen. Even though religion is an element in *Cards on the table*, it is not the main locus of moral values.

Thief or detective as protagonist

However, moral ideals do not always have to follow what is generally perceived as good – a concept which Christie develops skillfully in *Cards on the table*. This approach was first introduced by the American writer Edgar Allan Poe in *The murders in the rue morgue*, in which

⁴³ Pyrhönen, 1999:15

⁴⁴ Cawelti, 1977:22-24

readers follow the famous character C Auguste Dupin. He appears not only as the detective, but also as the moral idol of the readers, even though no external factor puts him in a morally superior position. In a crime fiction novel, the detective generally foils the criminal and explains what he has done. But in addition to neutralizing the criminal, he may also wish to explain to the readers why murder is wrong. Therefore, the criminal naturally becomes the antagonist that the detective is trying to stop and every choice the murderer makes can potentially be seen as wrong and morally despicable. This notion of the so-called ‘despicable criminal’ is enhanced when the murders are graphically described. Murders are framed as something horrific that the readers should avoid⁴⁵. Leblanc’s novels do the exact opposite.

Maurice Leblanc wrote his French-language crime fiction novels in the very early twentieth century. They are special in that they can be counted among the earliest examples of crime novels. They concern a criminal committing crime, but unlike the earlier examples of crime novels, they are not about crime as a tragedy. Instead, Leblanc’s novels establish the character of the gentleman thief Arsène Lupin, in adventurous novels showing Lupin tricking the police into seeing him as innocent⁴⁶. Interestingly, from a moral point of view, the police can be seen as antagonists instead of ideally moral. Therefore, these novels can almost be seen as anti-moral, because they go against the normal perception of what moral crime fiction should look like. It can be seen as a counter-reaction to the morality centered crime fiction novels of the late 1800s. These novels do occasionally explore moral themes and the protagonist can be presented as morally ambiguous.

Fascinatingly, in *Cards on the table*, Christie combines these two approaches to the moral status of her protagonists. The first, Hercule Poirot, is a former policeman and currently an amateur detective. He is not only the one who initiates the investigation but also the one who solves the murder mystery. He is the character that the readers follow throughout the narrative and that most often provides the point of view, even though the novel is told in the third person. But there are several points of view throughout the novel and one of them is that of the main victim, Shaitana. The most interesting aspect of Shaitana’s character is that he can be counted as a criminal because he is revealed to be a blackmailer. Therefore, since the readers also follow his point of view, it can be said that in *Cards on the table* the readers can see both the detective’s and the criminal’s point of view. In this regard, *Cards on the table* can be compared to the Lupin novels. There are, however, some significant differences in how these criminal characters are portrayed. Firstly, Lupin is framed as a protagonist throughout the novels, while the focalization

⁴⁵ Scaggs, 2005:18-19

⁴⁶ Scaggs, 2005:16

shifts in *Cards on the table*. Second, Lupin is portrayed as a somewhat triumphant criminal, while Shaitana is portrayed as a lonely victim. Third, Lupin is presented as consistently sympathetic, while Shaitana is framed as a character who can be seen as quite manipulative and cunning.

As for Poirot, one might even say that he comes across as less morally engaging than the thief Arsène Lupin. Even though Hercule Poirot is a main protagonist, he is not necessarily idolized like Dupin in *Murders in the rue morgue*. While Dupin could correct the suspects or murderers, Hercule Poirot rarely comments on the murderer’s moral choices. Instead, he discusses what happened and why: for instance, when he dissects the murderer’s plan at the end of novel, as he does in *Cards on the table*. Hercule Poirot cannot be said to judge the suspects or murderer directly. He simply presents what they have done and lets those around him make the moral choices.

One could therefore advance the suggestion that there are three different approaches to moral issues relative to the role of the typical protagonist in crime fiction novels. The first can be said to be the approach of the police procedural, exemplified in *The murders in the rue morgue*, in which the readers follow a detective or representative of the police who investigates the murder mystery. This approach enhances the explicitly moral nature of the genre and frames the detective as a moral role model whom the readers can idolize. The second approach is the approach of the crime novel, in which the readers follow a criminal committing crime. But the Lupin novels by Leblanc can be counted as different from the rest of the genre because the crime novel genre often moralizes against crime, framing the criminal as terrifying and as someone who is doing something horrible. This rarely happens in the Lupin novels, in which Lupin is framed as a sympathetic anti-hero. The third approach is the approach of the whodunit. Christie’s *Cards on the table* could be counted as an untraditional whodunit, because it does not necessarily follow one character. It instead follows several different characters at different times. And instead of solely following a moral detective whom the readers can be expected to idolize, *Cards on the table* follows several different detective characters and a victim with criminal tendencies. Thus, it can be concluded that these different points of view serve the purpose not only of showing more nuanced parts of the murder riddle so that it becomes easier for the reader to solve it, but also of showing different moral points of view, opening up the moral conclusion to the interpretation of the readers. This is a radically different approach when compared to the two other genres I have discussed, which clearly expect the readers to either idolize the protagonist as a moral role model or see the protagonist’s actions as horrible and

worthy of punishment. The fourth approach, which the Lupin stories sometimes seems to take, is almost to dismiss morality altogether and instead to focus on entertainment and escapism.

Murder and other crimes

In whodunits, murder is usually the main crime being investigated, but this has not always been the case. Murder, of course, almost necessarily implies moral questions in one way or another, but what happens if the nature of the crime changes? The question is relevant to *Cards on the Table*, in which several kinds of crimes occur. According to Scaggs, in the early beginnings of the crime fiction genre, other crimes, like theft or blackmail, were often portrayed. The moral issue in such detective stories comes out rather differently, as compared with murder investigations. One typical early example of a novel with a crime other than murder is *The Moonstone*, by Wilkie Collins which was written in the late 1800s. This crime fiction novel is about the theft of a rather large jewel called the moonstone⁴⁷. The novel can be seen as a police procedural, because it focuses on the police investigation. It mainly concerns the consequences of the theft, instead of making the crime itself into entertainment.

Collins, however, chooses to portray theft as a serious moral problem. In many ways he comes close to a contemporary novel with a much more obvious moral theme. *The murder of Marie Roget* by Edgar Allan Poe is unique in that it is based on a real-life murder case from the 1800s⁴⁸. The murder case in question may be the case of Mary Rogers, who was murdered with her daughter in the United States in the 1800s, and whom the title seems to allude to⁴⁹. This can be seen as a criticism against violence against women and a warning against violence and murder more generally. On top of that, the themes of arrest and punishment can show the negative results of violent crimes. Collins’ focus on the consequences of the theft of the stone is similar to Poe’s, in that, in both cases, the characters responsible have to face arrest and punishment for their crimes. But unlike Poe, Collins rarely uses themes of graphic violence to portray the seriousness of theft. Collins’ novel can be seen as more centered on the crime itself instead of aspects of the crime. It can be interpreted as saying that the crime itself is horrific, not just the violent parts of it.

In Christie’s *Cards on the table*, murder can be read as the main crime, and the murder is described in detail, to give the readers the clues they need to be able to solve the murder. However, graphic details are not used in the narrative to upset the readers. The point of *Cards*

⁴⁷ Scaggs, 2005:17

⁴⁸ Scaggs, 2005:18-20

⁴⁹ Scaggs, 2005:17-19

on the table is not to show how awful the violence is, but to give the reader a murder mystery, with implied moral themes. Therefore, Scaggs argues that Christie’s violent scenes are sterilized, to show the readers that the focus is on the clue at hand and not on the violence⁵⁰. The violent scenes can be almost poetically described, to entice the readers and to showcase the beauty and fun of the mystery. While the murder is the focus, there are also other crimes portrayed in the narrative. These crimes – for example, theft – are not necessarily there to be condemned by the readers, but to give further clues and backstory for the readers’ benefit. Even though serious themes, such as mental illness, can be depicted through the story of these crimes, this does not make mental illness a major theme in *Cards on the table*. But the moral question of whether mental illness absolves you of your crime is nonetheless in the background of the narrative.

Christie draws on the whole range of the tradition of crime fiction to develop a rather unique set of moral approaches in *Cards on the table*. *Cards on the table* does not testify to a moral mission of crime prevention. Descriptions of violence and murder take on minimalistic features, with sterilized and almost poetic aspects. But, at the same time, when it comes to morality, Christie presents more serious themes. Even though murder and jewel theft can be interpreted as serious crimes, Christie instead tries to tackle the serious topic of mental illness. By portraying how someone who can be said to be mentally ill commits a crime, she implicitly poses moral questions instead of giving clear answers. Instead of portraying crime to prevent it, as previous authors had done, Christie approaches crime both as a puzzle and as a moral problem. Not only can the readers solve a puzzle, they can also take their own moral stance.

⁵⁰ Scaggs, 2005:48-50

Chapter 2: ambiguous victims and moral values

Ambiguous characters can be used as a method to imply moral positions in crime fiction. These characters can pose a moral dilemma for the reader because they do not always choose the morally right decision. This dilemma can be enhanced if the character can be read as sympathetic, thus giving the reader a challenge as to whether moral judgment is the right choice. Thus, as discussed above, the moral becomes an undertone of the narrative that can give the reader the choice of whether they want to support or condemn the characters and suspects. But the ambiguity of the characters can also allow the readers to ignore the moral aspects of the characters and see only the ambiguity, as an extra nuance to the characters or as an extra piece of the puzzle that can make the whodunit more difficult to solve.

The character-building in crime fiction

The characters of crime fiction, and especially whodunits, are often easy to distinguish morally. There are either the protagonists that help the detective solve the case, or the antagonists, who are either murderers or characters who try to tamper with the investigation. This clear distinction can give the readers an incentive to root for a particular group of characters. However, since the moral is only implied in whodunits, it is rarely revealed by the antagonists’ committing criminal actions for the readers to see, but by the fact that they may hide something from the detective or change their statements in interrogations. Thus, these characters can give the readers reasons to suspect them, if they do change their statements. This can imply that the readers are expected to morally condemn the antagonistic characters and, similarly, to absolve the innocent protagonists of all guilt. But this can be further complicated by Bargainnier’s argument that characters in whodunits must be stereotypes, in order for the puzzle of the murder mystery to work. Not only can clear stereotypes be seen as easier to ‘distinguish morally’, but they can also make it much easier to find out who the readers are supposed to support and who they are supposed to suspect. But, at the same time, the characters cannot seem unrealistic. They cannot make choices that seem irrational or inhuman; therefore, they have to be more complex than simple stereotypes⁵¹. Cawelti advances the idea that this can be accomplished through two different stereotypes. The first stereotype is called ‘a cross between two worlds’: that is, a stereotype that can display traits from different stereotypes that usually oppose each other. The second stereotype mostly

⁵¹ Bargainnier, 1980:15-17

displays character traits of one world, but adds one trait from the other⁵². Bargainnier also argues that there is a third stereotype, which is based in British theatre. This stereotype comes from the Sullivan theatre of the 1700s, and it consists of one trait that is contrasted by a completely opposite trait. This kind of stereotype has traditionally been seen as comedic, but can also be used in whodunits. It is used by Christie⁵³ in whodunits mostly to characterize supporting characters. In the main characters, one could argue that a ‘cross between two worlds’ is mostly used. But, even more important and complex than the stereotyping of the characters are their roles, or the narrative functions of the characters. Bargainnier argues that there are four functions that are prominent in crime fiction: the detective, the victim, the suspect and the murderer⁵⁴. The victim can be seen as the most complex of these functions. This may be because, according to Somerset Maugham, the victim must both be so sympathetic that the readers would want to solve the murder mystery for them but must also provide a motivation for the murder, or the readers might find the murder mystery too difficult to solve. This is what Somerset Maugham calls ‘the victim’s paradox’⁵⁵. Malmgren also suggests that there has to be a relationship between the murderer and the victim⁵⁶, and that is not only because the murder mystery should thus be easier to solve; one can also advance the suggestion that these relationships can make the moral situation more complex. Instead of just defeating an evil antagonist to say that murder is wrong, more complex reasons for murder – for example, self-defense or revenge – can create a more complex moral undertone.

What is an ambiguous victim?

The word ‘ambiguous’ can have many different meanings, but in this context the term ‘ambiguous’ will be used in a moral sense. ‘Morally ambiguous’ can signify a character that is mostly portrayed sympathetically, but who makes morally questionable choices. This can give the readers an awareness of which choices can be seen as morally correct and which moral choices can be seen as morally incorrect. This notion can be enhanced by the notion of crime, and thus ambiguous characters can assist readers in judging whether crime is always wrong or if there are situations in which crime can be seen as a solution. Traditionally, ‘ambiguous’ means ‘with more than one meaning’ or ‘unclear’. Lechte, who researches film

⁵² Cawelti, 1977:14

⁵³ Bargainnier, 1980:39

⁵⁴ Bargainnier, 1980:17

⁵⁵ Somerset Maugham, 1995:21

⁵⁶ Malmgren, 2001:15

and film noir in particular, uses this term to describe characters who have more than one position in a narrative. These positions often oppose each other. He divides ambiguous characters into two categories, and the first one is that of ambiguous policemen. Ambiguous policemen are policemen or detectives who also can be counted as corrupt. The second category is ambiguous victims; these are victims who have also committed a form of crime⁵⁷. Lechte bases these categories on the French Bulgarian psychoanalyst Kristeva’s theory of the ambiguous. Kristeva’s theory of the ambiguous is based on her essay *Le pouvoir de l’horreur: sur l’abjection*, which was written in 1980. It was translated from French by Leon S Roudiez in 1982⁵⁸. Kristeva focuses on discomfort in literature, and why readers can feel discomfort when they read certain forms of literature. She defines the ambiguous as ‘The in-between, the composite, murderer who knows he [is] right (...)’⁵⁹. She sees the ambiguous as a rather unclear state which can be interpreted as a part of the personal psyche. This is also clearly connected to the consciousness of both the characters and the readers. Thus, Kristeva argues that when a criminal does not show guilt for the crime they committed, this can increase the discomfort of the readers, who, in a metaphorical sense, witness the crime.

Are there differences between female and male ambiguous victims?

The question here can be seen in two different ways. The first is the more straightforward: are male and female ambiguous victims portrayed differently? The second is whether female and male ambiguous victims are seen differently in moral terms. This question does not only address whether or not the male ambiguous victims are seen as more or less moral than the female, but whether different morals are being portrayed in the male and female ambiguous victims. To address these questions, it can be important to discuss which stereotypes can be used to portray male and female ambiguous victims. It can also be important to discuss which moral aspects can be portrayed in these tropes, and whether they can be seen as protagonists or antagonists. Bronfen, similarly to Lechte, is a film scholar who has written about characters in film noir, based on hard boiled crime stories. But unlike Lechte, who mostly bases his examples on male characters, Bronfen focuses on female characters. In particular, she researches the trope of *femme fatale*, a French phrase that can be translated as ‘dangerous woman’, which can be seen as a prominent type in hard boiled crime stories⁶⁰. According to

⁵⁷ Lechte, 2010:55

⁵⁸ Kristeva, 1982:2

⁵⁹ Kristeva, 1982:13

⁶⁰ Bronfen, 2010:74-76

Bronfen, a femme fatale is a female character who plays the role of a victim while at the same time she is involved with criminal activity. She is also often a seductress who uses sexual power to manipulate the detective character. Bronfen also adds that the femme fatale can both disguise herself and be quite manipulative⁶¹. Even though this type can be seen as more common in hard boiled crime stories it can also be a part of whodunits. Femme fatales can often be seen as antagonistic and can be counted amongst characters almost without feelings of guilt or shame in their character.

The damsel in distress is a female stereotype that has been a part of literature for many years, crime fiction included. The damsel in distress is generally a victim character and is often a victim of kidnapping or violence. This type can also be subverted, if the female character only pretends to be a victim. The damsel in distress is rarely a protagonist but can be both a side-character and an antagonist. The damsel in distress can often be passive and rarely takes action to control her own situation⁶².

One male stereotype that can be used in crime fiction is the fop. The fop is more commonly used in whodunits but is originally drawn from comedies of the 1700s. Fops are usually quite vain and interested in status⁶³. They can also be manipulative and have cunning motives. Fops are often queer coded, which signifies that they can often be perceived as homosexual. The fop type can often be antagonistic, but they are also often perceived as a caricature of the vain upper-class man with strong motives of over-confidence. The type may have originated in theatre, but it can also be seen in movies, especially in animated movies, in which the fop can be seen as particularly flamboyant.

According to Butler, society has divided people up into male and female to ensure reproduction. Therefore, instead of gender being a natural element of society, gender has become a performance to enhance reproduction rates. This has led to the norms for male and female being quite narrow, and individuals have been punished if they break gender norms. There can be two forms of punishment. The first form of punishment is ridicule. For example, a man who dresses in a traditionally feminine way is often ridiculed by society. The second form of punishment is demonization. A man who falls in love with other men is seen as a threat to reproduction and can therefore be demonized by society⁶⁴. These gender norms dictate that household work and childcare are traditionally female while manual labor and

⁶¹ Bronfen, 2010:74-76

⁶² Gilbert and Gubar, 2000

⁶³ Staves, 1982:413

⁶⁴ Butler, 1990

breadwinning are traditionally male. Shaitana can be seen as an unusual male character. He enjoys dressing up and wearing makeup and is also seen as an entertainer and a great host. This can be seen as a breach of gender norms and can lead to Shaitana being demonized.

One female stereotype can also be the woman as a mother. The woman as a mother, unlike the other types, is not necessarily seen as antagonistic in the same way. The woman as a mother type can be seen as an extension of the angel in the house trope. This character can often be framed as caring – someone who likes cooking and baking and is quite passive⁶⁵. There can also be motives of sacrifice for these kinds of characters. The woman as a mother type does not necessarily have to *be* a mother, but she can often take on the mother role, even for characters that she has only a distant relation to. This type is prominent across crime fiction genres and can often be depicted as a victim.

The abject and the functions of the abject

The abject discusses discomfort in literature and, in particular, it can focus on moral discomfort. One can advance the suggestion that moral discomfort is the discomfort that is felt when literary characters make particularly incorrect moral choices, violent crimes for example. The theory of the abject does in part focus on moral reactions to immoral actions in literature. In the essay *Powers of horror: on abjection*, Kristeva discusses discomfort in literature. She calls this discomfort the abject, and argues that the abject confronts boundaries in the human psyche and thus causes discomfort. The reaction to this discomfort is called abjection. These boundaries have, according to Kristeva, been set up to prevent damage to the human psyche; therefore, humans who are subjected to the abject can react negatively to it⁶⁶. at the same time, Kristeva argues that these confrontations of the inner boundaries are necessary, because humans are not always conscious of these boundaries in their daily lives. Confronting these boundaries can reveal that these boundaries are a part of life and need to be accepted as such. Denying them can lead to dangerous situations, because instead of learning how to handle these boundaries, individuals can end up repressing and ignoring them. They can thus become rather serious problems if they are not properly dealt with. Kristeva also argues that the best way to confront these boundaries is through modern literature, because modern literature can give readers a good model to follow when they need to confront the abject⁶⁷.

⁶⁵ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000

⁶⁶ Kristeva, 1982:5-10

⁶⁷ Kristeva, 1982:10-50

There are four different boundaries that the abject confronts to create discomfort. The first is the boundary between good and evil. This boundary explores torture, violence and murder, but it can also explore different kinds of psychopathology directly linked to evil and violent acts. Examples of such psychopathology are portrayals of psychopaths, sociopaths or murderers who shows signs of sadism. This confrontation of boundaries can be uncomfortable because humans can be conditioned to see other humans as empathetic to a fault. This can lead to the ignorance of the evil acts that surround people. Therefore, drawing attention to this boundary can be an important way to showcase and deal with the evil in people⁶⁸.

The second boundary that the abject can confront is the boundary between life and death. This boundary can deal with injuries, illness and dead bodies, but also the depiction of wounds and bruises. This boundary can also deal with various depictions of mental illness. Confronting this boundary is important, not only so that the human psyche in learning how to deal with illness and injury but also in learning how to deal with death. Kristeva emphasizes that ‘the dead body is death infecting life’⁶⁹ and that the human psyche needs to accept death as a part of life instead of treating it as a phenomenon separate from life. In other cases, death can be seen as a threat to life, and that can lead to a fear of death. Instead, death should be seen as a part of life, which can be a source of grief, but should be seen as inevitable and not be feared⁷⁰.

The third boundary that the abject confronts can be seen as a rather vast category. That is the boundary between clean and unclean. This boundary includes everything from unclean or rotting food to sexual practices that are not likely to lead to procreation⁷¹. This category can be difficult for the human psyche to deal with in an orderly manner because the contents can be very varied. Some elements from the boundaries between clean and unclean could for example be morally condemned, such as incest and pedophilia, while other things are simply avoided, like rotting food⁷². But there is also a third proper reaction to this category of the abject, and that is to accept the components within the category. This reaction can, for example, apply to the skin that can form on boiled milk, or homosexuality⁷³. Because both the category and the reactions to it are so varied, it can be difficult to give a good representation of these themes in literature. This can lead to these themes being repressed or ignored in

⁶⁸ Kristeva, 1982:13-25

⁶⁹ Kristeva, 1982:13-15

⁷⁰ Kristeva, 1982:13-15

⁷¹ Kristeva, 1982:5-100

⁷² Kristeva, 1982:15-50

⁷³ Kristeva, 1982:20-50

literature. Such themes can also be demonized in an exaggerated fashion that can lead to a more problematic view of some of the less problematic tropes in the category. Therefore, it can be difficult to find good literature for the category that can give readers a useful recipe for dealing with this part of the abject. But Kristeva argues that these parts of the abject should be accepted and not avoided because avoiding them can lead to negative physical and psychologic reactions⁷⁴.

The fourth boundary that the abject can confront is the boundary between legal and illegal. This boundary can confront any form of crime, but it can be weighted towards non-violent crime. This theme of crime that the abject confronts is also the one that recurs most often. An example of such crime is blackmail, which is not necessarily violent, but can be seen as threatening. This theme can be difficult to adapt to the sort of literature that offers a good moral role model, although Kristeva believes that one should not commit crime. That is because crime can become a part of life that can be difficult to fight against. Kristeva therefore argues that crime should be portrayed in such a way that readers would want to avoid it⁷⁵.

Kristeva argues that the abject has a cleansing function, which can be compared to Aristotle’s view of the psychological effect of tragedy. Like Aristotle, Kristeva believes that when readers are subjected to the abject in a literary work this can lead to catharsis⁷⁶. This is the result when readers accept the abject as a part of life. Instead of leaving them fearing the abject, literature that portrays the abject in a good way can, according to Kristeva, give readers a strategy for dealing with the abject. This can be done through showing a character’s journey towards acceptance of the abject. With this character as a role model, the readers can learn to handle the abject in a good way⁷⁷.

The other function of the abject, according to Kristeva, is its didactic function. This function teaches readers how to avoid the more problematic elements of the abject⁷⁸. This is achieved through the portrayal of consequences for the characters’ actions. When readers see that violent or non-violent crime has consequences, they can learn that the problematic parts of the abject should be avoided, instead of being feared. However, Kristeva argues that the didactic function can fail if the literary work becomes too fascinated with the graphic and violent side of the abject.

⁷⁴ Kristeva, 1982:10-50

⁷⁵ Kristeva, 1982:13-20

⁷⁶ Kristeva, 1982:50

⁷⁷ Kristeva, 1982:50

⁷⁸ Kristeva, 1982:50

The devilish aspect of the abject

The devilish aspect of the abject can be a reflection of evils in society and in the human psyche. Kristeva discusses these evils as a part of the abject that the human society needs to deal with in a healthy way. In her dissertation on the abject, Kristeva presents a new aspect. This is what she calls the ‘devilish’, and it has its roots in Judeo-Christian religion. The devilish can be seen as the confrontation between the boundaries of good and evil, because it can represent the evil sides of humanity⁷⁹. Kristeva argues that this aspect of the abject can be scary, because the devilish can often confront the evil aspects of humanity. This interpretation can also come from the fact that the devilish can appear threatening in the narrative. The threats do not have to be violent or deadly, but they have to be significant⁸⁰. They can also often create extra fear in the characters surrounding the devilish aspect, because this aspect can be rather unstable.

Kristeva interprets the devilish as a mysterious aspect of the abject, because it is difficult to find out where the evil aspects of the abject come from. It is also not always easily explained as evil⁸¹. The devilish can therefore be seen as something unknown that readers may want to find an explanation for. This mysterious aspect may manifest itself not only in the circumstances around the character but in the character themselves. A character that can inhabit this mysterious aspect of the devilish element of the abject can often be interpreted as a character that has secrets they may want to keep hidden⁸².

But the devilish aspect can also be seen as something fascinating. Fascination is here an aspect of the character that can make the character intriguing for the readers. This fascination does not necessarily need to be based in sympathy, but there has to be an element in the devilish aspect of the abject that catches the reader’s interest⁸³. Therefore, Kristeva argues that the reader’s reaction to the devilish aspect of the abject can mirror the reader’s reaction to the abject itself. When the reader encounters the abject in a literary work, they are first attracted to it, because it represents a new and interesting perspective. But after this initial reaction, readers can be disgusted by the devilish aspect of the abject, because it, like the abject itself⁸⁴, can be seen as scary or immoral. This notion of disgust can be enhanced if the descriptions of the abject are graphic.

⁷⁹ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸⁰ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸¹ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸² Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸³ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸⁴ Kristeva, 1982:116

The devilish aspect of the abject is seen by Kristeva as part of human nature. The fact that the devilish aspect of the abject can be imbedded in human consciousness can enhance the frightening effect of the devilish aspect of the abject. This can also decrease the distance between the reader and the devilish aspect of the abject. In more extreme cases, a question the readers may ask themselves is: ‘could I commit these kinds of crimes, since this aspect is also part of my human psyche?’ This can make readers more reflective about their own situation and can teach them how to handle the devilish aspect of the abject⁸⁵.

But this is not always how the devilish aspect of the abject is portrayed, especially not in entertainment literature. In entertainment literature, the devilish aspects of the abject can often become a caricature. In these instances, characters that inhabit the devilish aspect of the abject can become antagonistic. This can have the opposite effect to that which Kristeva anticipates, because it can lead to the devilish aspect of the abject being seen as a cartoonish element to be mocked. It can also lead to the devilish aspect of the abject being feared, instead of being confronted in the proper manner. This can mean that humans who are faced with people that might possess similar traits in real life may be slightly unprepared to deal with them⁸⁶.

Another question that the devilish aspect of the abject can pose to readers is whether or not humanity can run away from the devilish aspect of the abject. This can seem like a good option, because the devilish aspect of the abject can seem quite threatening and dangerous. But since Kristeva argues that the devilish aspect of the abject can be intrinsically connected to the human psyche, this task can seem quite difficult. This task may be dangerous in and of itself, because it can require humans to repress, ignore or deny parts of their consciousness. This can lead to the devilish aspect of the abject becoming a bigger threat, because it can dominate the psyche all the more⁸⁷. Therefore, Kristeva suggests that the devilish aspect of the abject should be accepted. This acceptance should not necessarily involve accepting the actions that the devilish aspect of the abject can lead to, but avoiding the devilish aspect of the abject’s domination of the human psyche. Thus, accepting the devilish aspect of the abject can be said to consist in accepting the devilish aspect of the abject as a part of human nature⁸⁸.

One can certainly identify a devil-motif in Shaitana’s character. Not only does his name mean ‘devil’, but he also enjoys imitating Mephistopheles, who is the devil in *Faust*⁸⁹.

⁸⁵ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸⁶ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸⁷ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸⁸ Kristeva, 1982:116

⁸⁹ Goethe, 2009

Christie reveals that this does not only occur at a costume ball, but also in Shaitana’s daily life⁹⁰. There are also several instances in which Shaitana himself is described as devilish: for example, when he has started the dinner. At this point, Shaitana ‘looked more devilish than ever’⁹¹. But it can also be argued that the character of Shaitana inhabits the devilish aspect of the abject. He can, for example, be seen as mysterious, because his country of origin is unknown for most of the narrative. It is speculated that he might be Argentinian, but it is later revealed that he was Syrian⁹². He can also be seen as threatening, because he is seen as a ‘blackmailer’⁹³. But he does not blackmail others for money – only to put an end to their rumors⁹⁴. This may be the reason that he is feared by other characters in the narrative. One might suggest that the fact that he does not wish to gain anything from the blackmailing only makes him a more threatening character, because he does not have a very logical motivation for slandering others. At the same time, he can be read as a fascinating character that might catch the reader’s interest: he wears eccentric clothing and enjoys makeup; he enjoys hosting parties and he is described as a ‘showman’⁹⁵. One could also argue that the reader cannot ignore Shaitana’s presence, because he is the first victim of the narrative and his murder is the main crime that needs to be solved. But one relatively original aspect of Christie’s treatment of this character is that instead of Shaitana being the antagonist of the narrative, he is the victim. Therefore, one could argue that Shaitana is not necessarily a caricature of the devilish aspect of the abject. Instead, he can be seen as a stereotype that grows more sympathetic throughout the narrative. This can force the readers to face the fact that just because the devilish aspect of the abject might be part of something slightly malevolent, it does not mean that all parts of the devilish aspect should be avoided or repressed. It can also make readers aware of the fact that even though someone might be perceived as evil, this does not mean that they are, or that they deserve to be killed.

Homosexuality and moral motifs in Shaitana’s character

What is considered morally incorrect and taboo changes over time. Moral development can be especially emphasized in discussions of sexual orientation and gender identity. Butler argues that because heteronormativity was created to protect procreation, all sexual orientations and

⁹⁰ Christie, 2010:8-287

⁹¹ Christie, 2010:35-40

⁹² Christie, 2010:10-178

⁹³ Christie, 2010:300

⁹⁴ Christie, 2010:300

⁹⁵ Christie, 2010:22

gender identities that can be seen as adversaries to the heterosexual norm can be condemned and seen as immoral⁹⁶. Moral condemnation can be seen especially clearly in the fop-trope, a character that can often be antagonistic. Therefore, in this subchapter the characteristics of the fop-trope will be compared with traits in Shaitana’s character to determine if he can be read as a fop. Subsequently it will be discussed how this fop-trope affects the novel’s moral implications. In modern times, the acceptance of different sexual orientations and gender identities has grown, and homosexuality is no longer seen as taboo, but old tropes that can be interpreted as a form of condemnation are still prevalent, especially in whodunits. Thus, one can suggest, with Scaggs, that the whodunit is still a relatively conservative genre of crime fiction⁹⁷, which may still put an emphasis on condemning homosexuality to a certain degree. This can be seen in Shaitana’s character, because he can be interpreted as someone who breaks masculine gender norms. He enjoys entertaining guests and he has an interest in beautiful things, such as flowers and handmade Persian carpets⁹⁸.

One can also add that the fop-type in general can be read as quite feminine, because they can be seen as vain, and vanity is mostly seen as a feminine trait. With Beauvoir, Butler argues that one becomes a woman as a foil to the man, instead of being born a woman in one’s own right⁹⁹, and Shaitana can also be seen as a character who becomes feminine in contrast to the other men in the narrative. When compared to the two male suspects, one of whom is a major in the military and the other of whom is a doctor¹⁰⁰, Shaitana might seem feminine. This is further emphasized by the fact that Shaitana is one of two characters who does not have a clear occupation and instead spends his time gossiping and hosting dinners. Moreover, even Shaitana’s name can be read as feminine, because his name is Arabic for ‘female devil’¹⁰¹.

Shaitana can be read as vain, because he puts a relatively large amount of effort into his looks, especially his brows and his mustache¹⁰². This can be seen as an example of Pyrhönen’s mirror image, because both Shaitana and Hercule Poirot are men that put effort into their appearance, making this an instance of the I-am-you¹⁰³. But whereas Hercule Poirot uses the time and effort only on his mustache, which can be seen as masculine, Shaitana uses

⁹⁶ Butler, 1990

⁹⁷ Scaggs, 2005:48-49

⁹⁸ Christie, 2010:205-305

⁹⁹ Butler, 1990:45

¹⁰⁰ Christie, 2010:26-29

¹⁰¹ Oxford Dictionary, 2014

¹⁰² Christie, 2010:6-7

¹⁰³ Pyrhönen, 1999:15

his time and effort on his makeup and eyebrows, which can be seen as relatively feminine. Shaitana’s vanity can also be seen as selfish, because he only wishes to make himself look beautiful without doing much good for others, while Poirot’s vanity is contrasted with his helping to solve the mystery.

Shaitana is perceived as seeing status as important, as is especially evident when the readers first meet him. He is very preoccupied with who comes or does not come to his parties, also because his parties are seen as ‘marvelous’¹⁰⁴. He gives to charity to let other people know that he is a good person. Therefore, one might suggest that his project of collecting people who have gotten away with murder¹⁰⁵ is pursued in order for him to become known as a charitable man who stops murderers, and to achieve a higher status than he already has. This can lead to two different motives becoming prominent in his character. The first is selfishness, because he tries to stop murderers and hosts parties only to boost his own ego. The second prominent motif is that of loneliness, because he does all this partying and wishes to meet criminals as a way of making more people willing to talk to him. This can also enhance the notion that Shaitana can be read as a homosexual, because, since homosexuality was a crime in the vast majority of the world in 1936, he could have been seen as a criminal. Another aspect that should be remarked upon is that one can interpret Shaitana as thinking he is a superior detective in relation to the police, and that he dies while trying to stop a murderer. So, through his murder, he is not morally condemned for being homosexual, feminine or vain, but for wanting to be seen as more than a vain homosexual. Butler argues that the gender roles and norms for sexuality are so narrow that hetero- or homosexuals that wish to break these norms – for example, by being less feminine – are morally judged and punished for it¹⁰⁶. The moral condemnation is especially seen in the fact that everyone is afraid of Shaitana, not because he is a homosexual of a certain status, but because he wishes to break out of that status through his gossiping.

Shaitana can also be said to be seductive, not in the sense of explicit flirting, but by implication, through the fact that he enjoys spontaneously inviting the characters around him to parties and dinners. His seductiveness is thus quite subtle; instead of directly showing his possible romantic interest, he invites characters that he might be read as interested in to parties. But can this be seen as a romantic request, or are these simply characters that Shaitana wishes to have a friendlier relation to? These are questions that are not directly answered in

¹⁰⁴ Christie, 2010:9-10

¹⁰⁵ Christie, 2010:10-19

¹⁰⁶ Butler, 1990

the text, so the readers will have to speculate. This makes his seduction less clear and more like a suggestion. The readers never quite know whether Shaitana is looking for romance or a fulfilling friendship. This can enhance the mysterious motif in Shaitana’s character, because the readers do not have any knowledge about Shaitana’s romantic interests, or if he has romantic interests at all. This may have been done because his romantic interests are not relevant for the narrative. Staves also argues that a fop is not necessarily seen as homosexual, but as an asexual who enjoys female company¹⁰⁷ – something that can be seen in Shaitana’s character.

However, Shaitana is also described as ‘queer’¹⁰⁸, which is a word that can have two different meanings. The first meaning of the word queer is someone who is eccentric, and this eccentricity can come both from their interactions with others and from their interests. The eccentricity can also come from their actions in general. If their actions are not necessarily seen as part of normal behavior, someone can be deemed queer. The second meaning of the word queer is more complicated. In the interwar period, queer was seen as a slur, mostly used against homosexual men. But it was also used of other members of society that did not necessarily identify as straight or cis-gendered. In modern times, parts of the LGBTI+ community have reclaimed the term queer as an umbrella term for all sexual orientations and gender identities that are not straight and cis-gendered. But some parts of the LGBTI+ community still see queer as a slur. This could be due to their experience of relating the word to bullying, harassment and other forms of verbal abuse. The interesting aspect of the description of Shaitana as ‘queer’¹⁰⁹, is that Christie does not specify which interpretation of the word queer she is referring to. Therefore, it could be that Shaitana is eccentric, homosexual or both. One could argue that this signifies that murder is wrong no matter what, and that Shaitana’s sexual orientation is irrelevant; stopping his murderer is what is crucial in *Cards on the table*.

But can he be said to be flirting with women? Throughout the novel he does have more interactions with women than men. Women are also the group that is most likely support him. In addition to this, Anne Meredith’s roommate Rhoda Dawes also testifies that Shaitana flirted with Anne Meredith when they were on vacation together. Therefore, one could argue that Shaitana is either straight or bisexual, given how he is portrayed. This heterosexual portrayal may oppose the aforementioned homosexual themes, but one could

¹⁰⁷ Staves, 1982:414

¹⁰⁸ Christie, 2010:28-31

¹⁰⁹ Christie, 2010:28-31

argue that hubris is still a motif, because he wishes to seek justice on his own, and not by simply reporting his suspicions.

The flirting can be interpreted as somewhat artificial, and there are a few reasons for this. The first is that one could argue that the first person Shaitana shows an interest in is Hercule Poirot. They are the first two who meet, and Shaitana invites Poirot to dinner. But the question is whether Shaitana sees Poirot as a love interest or a rival. It is mentioned that Shaitana invites Poirot to dinner to ‘bait the (...) little man, Hercule Poirot’¹¹⁰. This can mean either to lure him into a relationship or to lure him into a criminal mystery, and this motif can enhance both the mysterious and the homosexual motives. Shaitana is killed so early in the narrative that it can be difficult for readers to know what his intentions are. Thus, the question of whether Shaitana is homosexual and wishes to pursue Poirot is not answered in the narrative. This lack of clarity is further enhanced by the fact that there are no direct examples of Shaitana flirting with men in the narrative. He is never directly portrayed as flirting with anyone. This may be because it is not relevant for the plot, but it can also enhance the mysterious motif, because the readers do not know if he actually flirted with Anne Meredith, or if they simply had a polite conversation that Rhoda Dawes exaggerated. With Staves, one could argue that Shaitana is a ‘coxcomb’, or a fop who is obsessed with gossip¹¹¹. Therefore, one can also interpret the flirting as a pursuit of interesting gossip instead of a romantic pursuit. This can allow the readers to create their own impression of who Shaitana is as a character, and this can also apply to his sexual orientation. Since the moral is only implied, one can advance the suggestion that the moral judgment and the subsequent homophobia of Christie is also only implied. It can allow the reader to ignore the negative judgments of the moral and make their own assumptions about Shaitana’s identity. This is made possible not only because the moral is secondary but because there is more than one moral element: both the condemnation of homosexuality, hubris and hypocrisy, and the exploration of justice as an overall theme in the narrative. This can lead to homosexuality and homophobia taking a smaller part in the narrative, both because other explorations of the moral message are more prominent and because the onus of the novel is on the murder mystery, not on the moral aspects of homosexuality.

¹¹⁰ Christie, 2010:15-19

¹¹¹ Staves, 1982:415-416

Motifs of crime and vigilance in Shaitana’s character

Shaitana can be said to be an ambiguous victim because he is both murdered during *Cards on the table* and perceived as a blackmailer. Therefore, there can be several motifs in his character that can be crucial to understanding him and his motivations. Two of these motifs are vigilance and crime. Both are stated quite early in the narrative and can contribute to creating a clear contrast in his character. The motif of vigilance can also contribute to an impression of Shaitana as a law-abiding citizen. There can also be several different motivations to Shaitana’s vigilance. They can either be selfish or selfless, and this is not necessarily clearly stated in the narrative. The selfish reason for Shaitana’s vigilance is a desire to boost his own ego. He can try to stop characters that he perceives to be murderers because he wishes to brag to others that he has stopped murderers in the past. He can also stop murderers because he perceives these characters to be dangerous and wishes to stop them from committing new murders. But he can also try to stop murderers to build a new façade for himself, so that characters around him will want to initiate friendlier relations with him.

From the beginning of the dinner party scene it is quite clear that Shaitana wishes to report the murderers to the police. He has invited a representative of the police, a representative of the secret service and a renowned detective¹¹², perhaps in order to secure the arrest of the murderer. This motif of vigilance is enhanced by the fact that he utters a line that can be interpreted as an accusation of murder. The line is uttered to the character Dr Roberts, who is revealed to be the murderer later in the narrative. Shaitana makes two different statements in the dinner party scene, and one of them is directed towards Dr Roberts. The other statement may be directed at all the suspect characters, because it discusses how a murder can be disguised as an accident¹¹³. One can see these statements as a method of provoking a murder attempt. One might suggest that this murder attempt is provoked in order to prevent the murderer from murdering more characters in the narrative.

But Shaitana can make all the characters around him fear him¹¹⁴, and one might suggest that this is because of his threatening demeanor. He is known for his gossip and he does choose to have a slightly threatening physical presence that can mimic Mephistopheles. These motifs of fear can make Shaitana a more threatening and mysterious presence, because the readers have a relatively small amount of knowledge as to why every other character fears Shaitana. Therefore, the fear is not necessarily that of a concrete threat but a fear of the

¹¹² Christie, 2010:22-26

¹¹³ Christie, 2010:35-40

¹¹⁴ Christie, 2010:9-10

unknown, and thus the devilish aspect of the abject in Shaitana’s character can be enhanced, because the characters are in a state which Kristeva would call the ambiguous. It is a middle-state, in which the characters fear something unknown¹¹⁵ in Shaitana’s character that enhances the devilish traits he might possess. This is further enhanced by the fact that Shaitana does not express guilt¹¹⁶ for causing others to fear him. One might suggest that he only instills fear in others to sustain his own status.

This motif of fear is also enhanced by the fact that Shaitana does not want money. His desire to sustain his status is perhaps a weak motive that is relatively difficult for the readers to discover without the need of interpretation. Without this status-sustaining motive, one could argue that Shaitana becomes a more threatening presence, because his manipulation of others does not have a clear goal. Therefore, it can seem to be manipulation for manipulation’s sake, which can make Shaitana into a character with no conscience. One can also see Shaitana as a character with little to no empathy, when he only manipulates others seemingly for his own pleasure. This can give Shaitana a kind of antagonistic psychopathology most often seen in murderers in crime fiction. He becomes an almost pathological narcissist who only hurts others for his own gain. The fact that he is a victim can thus become a moral twist, because it can show that he did have redeeming traits.

It is also said that he is a ‘spiritual blackmailer’¹¹⁷ which can signify that he only blackmails others to tarnish their reputation, not for money. It can also signify that he blackmails others to maintain his own status. This blackmailing motif becomes the crime that makes Shaitana explicitly an ambiguous victim. Up until this point in the narrative the only signs the readers have received that Shaitana might be criminal is the fear that he instills in other characters and the fact that he claims to collect them. Therefore, when Shaitana becomes an ambiguous victim, his murder gets a clear motivation. One could also suggest that the theme of crime in his character becomes clearer and the motif of manipulation is enhanced. This can give the reader the implied moral message that manipulation is wrong, or that the vigilance motif in his character may be artificial, because he catches characters only by manipulating them to keep his own status. Another implied moral message may be that vigilance is dangerous, because murderers can be dangerous. This is also stated by Poirot early in the narrative, and also repeated after Shaitana’s murder. This is also enhanced by the

¹¹⁵ Kristeva, 1982:13

¹¹⁶ Kristeva, 1982:13; Christie, 2010:10-19

¹¹⁷ Christie, 2010:300

fact that Dr Roberts murdered more than one person, which can create a stronger danger motif in his character.

Shaitana also says that he collects people¹¹⁸, and this can make Shaitana into a less sympathetic character. This can enhance his psychopathology of narcissism, because it shows that he sees others as objects. He can be said to disregard the fact that these people actually are people, and not objects for his collection. Even though he claims to collect people who have gotten away with murder, he still reduces these characters – who may be dangerous or may try to live out their own narratives after these murders – to objects, which may be hurtful in and of itself. The fact that he also can be seen as manipulating these murderers either for his own amusement or to find friendly relations through them can make the manipulation motif more sinister, because he does not, as the vigilance motif might suggest, want to report these characters for the greater good, but only for his own gain. One might also argue that this sinister motif is only enhanced further after his death, because the implications of his project also hurt innocent characters, such as Rhoda Dawes. The fact that there seems to be little to no thought process behind Shaitana’s collection also adds to the sinister manipulation motif, because it may seem to be manipulation for manipulation’s sake.

One can discuss who is put in greater danger by Shaitana’s collection of suspected murderers – Shaitana, or the ‘objects’ themselves. Shaitana is only consciously putting himself in danger, and one might believe that by staging a murder attempt he is only hurting himself. This is made clear by the amount of security he has put into this project; there is not only police present at the dinner party but also secret service. This may imply that Shaitana has factored in how dangerous these characters can be. He also insists on not playing bridge, and sits nearest to the suspect, and one might suggest that this is to ensure that he is the one most likely to get hurt. This can enhance the motif of vigilance, because it shows that he deems these murderers or at least one of these murderers to be so dangerous that he needs to stop them himself.

However, the readers do not know the entire plan of Shaitana; this has to be interpreted. This plan, one might suggest, is only based on the reader’s assumptions, for several reasons. First of all, until the end of the narrative, the readers do not know that Shaitana is right in his assumptions that these characters are murderers. Based on the reader’s knowledge during the dinner scene, they might all be innocent. The readers also do not know how many of the characters actually are murderers. There may be one or four murderers in the

¹¹⁸ Christie, 2010:15-19

dinner party. Secondly, at the beginning of the narrative, when it is discovered that some of these characters are murderers, the readers do not know the motivations of the murders, so all of these murders might have been committed in self-defense. This can pose the question to the readers: how many innocent characters, or characters without options other than murder, should be endangered to arrest an actually dangerous murderer? And despite all Shaitana’s efforts, are these characters still in danger because Shaitana has chosen to provoke murderers? These questions can be said to be answered indirectly in the narrative, because Shaitana’s murder does result in one other murder and a murder attempt. Therefore, one might suggest that the moral is that this kind of vigilance is wrong, because it does endanger others. The moral message also argues, one might suggest, that vigilance is wrong when the vigilante does not have proof, even if they are right, because they can endanger others, and because they may be accusing someone who is innocent or did not have any choice but to commit a crime.

Shaitana as an immigrant or a part of middle-class society

Shaitana can be seen both as a part of middle-class society and an outsider, because he is perceived as a threat in part of the narrative. One of the reasons he can be seen as a threat is that he is an immigrant, and through rather large parts of the narrative the readers and the characters surrounding Shaitana do not know his ethnicity, which can instill skepticism in the characters. This can also be a method of enhancing the mysterious motif, because it is not known where Shaitana originates from. He is seen as an outsider, most likely because he is not perceived as European, and therefore themes of prejudice and racism can be found in his character, because one could argue that his ethnicity is one of the reasons why Shaitana is not seen as a natural part of middle-class society. But one can discuss whether or not he is indeed ostracized from middle-class society, because he is invited to larger events. The characters around him usually also accept his invitations¹¹⁹.

One could argue that Shaitana does have a high status, because it is stated that ‘he rests comfortably in a large mansion’¹²⁰. It is also said that he can afford both a butler and a cook, and the cook is described in relatively positive terms. This can signify that he is seen as an upper middle-class citizen, which may be bolstered by the fact that he is asked to contribute to a charity exhibition at the beginning of the narrative. Therefore, one cannot necessarily argue that he is completely ostracized from society, when he is both invited to and

¹¹⁹ Christie, 2010:5-10

¹²⁰ Christie, 2010:9-10

expected to contribute to charity functions. This can also be part of a new façade that he is trying to build for himself, because he wishes to attain a higher status.

Despite this, he is feared by most of the characters around him. One might suggest that this fear stems both from his intimidating demeanor and his status as an outsider. One cannot necessarily argue that he is more feared because of his immigrant status, but the fear may also stem from this. The characters around him can be read as unsure of his ethnic origin, and this prejudice does inform their fear. Therefore, his unknown origins can be another factor in the already prominent fear motif. This can also stem from racism, because he is more feared when he is perceived as not originating from a so-called western society.

His parties are still seen as ‘marvelous’¹²¹, and it is seen as a mistake to decline his invitations without good reason. One could argue that he maintains his social status through these parties. At these parties he becomes a welcoming host, and the fear motif becomes a minor motif in this part of the narrative. These parties also allow Shaitana to make new acquaintances that do not know him as a dangerous outsider but only as a great host. Therefore, one might suggest that he can increase his status through these parties, because they can create new connections for him.

His origins remain unknown throughout most of the narrative and one might suggest that he becomes more of an outsider when the readers and the characters do not have knowledge of his origins. These unknown origins make him less trustworthy to the characters around him. One might suggest that this can make Shaitana a somewhat more ostracized character, because he might seem less reliable than the other characters around him. Ostracization can enhance the mysterious aspect of his character, and it can also enhance the fear motif in the other characters, because it is difficult to guess who exactly Shaitana is when even his country of origin is quite unknown.

Shaitana is still a character who enjoys entertaining others. He enjoys being a host, and usually suggests topics for the guests to discuss and also starts activities for them during his dinner parties. This can both be interpreted by the readers as a strategy to maintain his new façade and be seen as a genuine interest in both the dinner party and his guests. The latter option, one might suggest, is the most probable, because he is described as a ‘showman’¹²², in support of the claim that Shaitana is not only a devilish character but also an entertainer who likes making his guests feel welcome. One can also argue that, in the parts of the narrative in which Shaitana is acting as a host, not only does his status as an outsider slightly diminish,

¹²¹ Christie, 2010:10-26

¹²² Christie, 2010:22

but so do the motifs of the devil and manipulation. This motif of the entertainer can thus increase the sympathy of the readers with Shaitana.

But it is also revealed in an early conversation in the narrative that it is not necessarily normal for the characters around Shaitana to greet him. One could argue that this conversation supports his status as an outsider, because it shows that a gesture that would be normal towards any other citizen is not normal towards Shaitana. The lack of decency may be caused either by his threatening demeanor or racism. He is both an immigrant, probably non-western, and of unknown origins, and therefore he can be seen as somewhat of an intimidating stranger. The fact that it is rare to greet him also introduces a motif of loneliness into the narrative, which, one could argue, increases the sympathy for Shaitana’s character. One can also inquire as to whether the characters around Shaitana actually attend his parties of their own accord or whether they only see it as a duty to politely accept his invitations. One can conclude that, despite Shaitana’s high status, he is seen as an immigrant and a stranger, but instead of this becoming a somewhat standard moral message – ‘do not judge a book by its cover’ – it may be implied that when others have a relatively high tendency to view someone as a threat, they can internalize that message and decide to become the image that they are perceived, as instead of fighting against it. Instead of a frank moral message about not judging others, one can interpret Shaitana’s character arc as a warning message about people becoming what you judge them to be. But with conservative eyes this character arc can also be seen as a warning against rising up in the hierarchy. And if one interprets Shaitana to be a homosexual immigrant, the message can become especially alarming, because it can be read as a warning against these minorities’ inclusion into the ‘normal’ majority, precisely because they are part of one or more minority groups.

Motifs of murder and suicide in Mrs. Lorrimer’s character

Mrs. Lorrimer is one of the dinner guests in the suspect group in Shaitana’s dinner party. She is a widow, and a bridge player¹²³. She calls Poirot at one point in the narrative and confesses to two murders¹²⁴, but the moral question arises, is she really a murderer, or is she lying to protect another character? The further question is, if a woman like her is a murderer, did this murder occur in self-defense, and does self-defense justify murder? Another moral question is how the motif of suicide is to be handled morally. Is it simply tragic, or can suicide be seen as morally wrong? This moral question becomes more intricate when it is revealed in the

¹²³ Christie, 2010:26-31

¹²⁴ Christie, 2010:479-482

narrative that Mrs. Lorrimer is dying¹²⁵. Then one could argue that the moral question becomes, is it right for an individual to decide when to die, or is it morally wrong to choose to die?

Mrs. Lorrimer confesses to two murders, and one of them is the murder of Shaitana¹²⁶. One might suggest that Mrs. Lorrimer is not a plausible suspect, because up until this point in the narrative, she has been portrayed as quite a sympathetic character, and the reveal can be sudden for the reader. Mrs. Lorrimer’s supposed motivation for the murder of Shaitana is also quite surprising and one could argue that up until this scene, Mr. Lorrimer has not been mentioned. Therefore, the only knowledge the readers have of him is that he is the husband of Mrs. Lorrimer. Thus, one might suggest that these confessions do not seem very reliable, and they may have been fabricated to protect someone else.

Mrs. Lorrimer is conceived of throughout the narrative as quite a competent woman. Even though she is not employed and a widow, she is still part of the upper middle class, and she is still being invited to parties. She can also afford to have a servant¹²⁷, so one might suggest that she is not only a competent woman but a woman living quite an affluent and happy life. The notion of her happy life is bolstered by the fact that until her confession scene she does not seem to show any discontent, and she is also well versed in culture, especially theatre.

But she is also, as mentioned above, dying¹²⁸, and even though this is revealed late in the narrative, it is still part of the narrative. One might suggest that there are motives that accompany the dying motive, for example a pain motive. That may explain the subsequent suicide motive. The dying motive can also explain the fact that she decides to confess to murders that she did not necessarily commit. Since she only has six months to live¹²⁹, one might suggest that she does not fear the death penalty.

She also confesses to two different murders, but since it is quite clear in the narrative that she did not commit Shaitana’s murder, one might suggest that the murder of her husband was either done in self-defense or was not a murder at all. Since few details of the murder are provided, it can be difficult for the readers to speculate as to whether or not Mrs. Lorrimer is actually a murderer. There is no evidence in the narrative that can prove or disprove Mrs. Lorrimer’s claims. The only aspect of Mr. Lorrimer’s murder that the readers have knowledge

¹²⁵ Christie, 2010:481-485

¹²⁶ Christie, 2010:479-482

¹²⁷ Christie, 2010:26-479

¹²⁸ Christie, 2010:481-485

¹²⁹ Christie, 2010:479-482

of is that Mrs. Lorrimer claims to have committed it. She never discloses which method was used to murder Mr. Lorrimer. But she does admit in the false confession that it was Shaitana’s line about creating the pretense of an accident to hide a murder that convinced her to murder Shaitana, and therefore one might suggest that Mr. Lorrimer could have died in conditions that might mimic an accident of some sort. Therefore, the moral message in this part of the narrative, one could argue, is that one should not blame oneself for another’s death. This moral message can also be enhanced by the fact that Hercule Poirot seems almost dismissive of the fact that she Mrs. Lorrimer murdered her husband. Therefore, one might suggest that it is a more complex situation, and that whichever state Mr. Lorrimer was in, to advocate that this murder had only one motivation would be quite difficult.

Are there motives of suicide in Mrs. Lorrimer’s character arc? When Mrs. Lorrimer is first found murdered in her own home it is seen as a suicide. That is because it is also revealed to Superintendent that Mrs. Lorrimer was dying and notes are found on her bedside table. But this is later dismissed by Poirot, and it is revealed that Mrs. Lorrimer was murdered¹³⁰. Another interesting question is, since Poirot was so dismissive of the fact that Mrs. Lorrimer murdered her husband, can one advance that this death *was* a suicide? One can easily argue that suicide was a taboo subject in 1936, when *Cards on the table* was written, and one can also argue that it would be plausible for someone to blame themselves if they lost a loved one to suicide. This notion may be supported both by Poirot’s dismissal and by the fact that Mrs. Lorrimer does not discuss her husband or his death before a motivation for the false confession is needed. If her husband did die by suicide it may also be likely that the method chosen could resemble an accident.

According to Pyrhönen, it is most common for the detective and the murderer or criminal to mirror each other in personality¹³¹, but with Mrs. Lorrimer the I-am-not-you, or the differences between her murder and her husband’s death, are quite clear. While it is easily understood by the readers what happened to Mrs. Lorrimer, Mr. Lorrimer’s case is never solved. Therefore, while Mrs. Lorrimer can be seen as a victim that is taken care of and receives justice, Mr. Lorrimer is not. He goes from being a person to only having a role in the narrative, and this role is as the motivation for a false confession. Therefore, although Mrs. Lorrimer’s dead body is found and examined to give her justice, Mr. Lorrimer’s dead body is never found in the narrative. One might suggest that the moral message becomes one of

¹³⁰ Christie, 2010:508-513

¹³¹ Pyrhönen, 1999:15

respecting the privacy of others, and that suicide or accidents cannot be blamed on the next of kin.

Another question is, who is Mrs. Lorrimer is trying to protect? Even though says that it is Anne Meredith¹³², might one advance the suggestion that she is also protecting herself? By confessing to Shaitana’s murder, she will remove the need to discuss these cases any further, and she can live a more peaceful existence. One might argue that she will not be questioned further if she just confesses, but if the investigation continues further, her painful past with her husband may be brought up in interrogations. One can discuss whether this might cause Mrs. Lorrimer to lose some or all of her status. Therefore, one could argue that she protects her own reputation so that the story of her husband’s murder becomes hers to tell. One can also argue that she can choose how much of the story can be told, if she is the one confessing. Therefore, instead of having those around her speculating, she can be the one disclosing the most necessary details. One can conclude that murder is an explicit motif in Mrs. Lorrimer’s character arc while suicide is either revealed to be fake, or can be brought into the narrative by implication alone. Therefore, one cannot necessarily say that there is a clear moral exploration of suicide in the narrative of *Cards on the table*. But one can detect the message that suicide is a tragic accident that the next of kin are not necessarily to blame for. While this view of suicide can be seen as arrogant, it does put the focus on the guilt that the relatives of suicide victims may feel after a suicide, and can be read as well-meant advice against blaming oneself for someone else’s suicide.

Motives of self-defense and greed in Mrs. Lorrimer’s character

Since the actual motivation of Mr. Lorrimer’s murder is left out of the narrative, the readers are left to speculate on why Mr. Lorrimer was murdered, and if he was murdered. The moral exploration then becomes one into whether or not there are reasons that can make murder right, or if murder is always wrong. If Mr. Lorrimer was murdered, there might be several different motivations for a murder, but Malmgren argues that ‘Love, lust, loathing and lucre’¹³³ are the most common motivations. One can in addition to these motives add self-defense: for example, self-defense against domestic violence. What kind of moral message becomes part of the narrative when domestic violence can be read as a motivation? These questions can be explored in this part of the narrative because the motivation for Mr.

¹³² Christie, 2010:482

¹³³ Malmgren, 2001:16

Lorrimer’s murder is only implied; therefore, the readers may speculate as to what the motivation was.

As mentioned above, Mrs. Lorrimer is still a part of the upper middle class after her husband’s death, so one can speculate as to whether Mrs. Lorrimer murdered her husband to inherit his wealth. This would fit her into the stereotype of the femme fatale who pretends to be the victim while actually being criminal for her own gain¹³⁴. But this stereotype does not necessarily fit in with Mrs. Lorrimer’s character traits. Unlike the femme fatale, Mrs. Lorrimer does not hide who she is, and she cannot be seen as seductive or manipulative. She is instead a caring woman, who explains bridge and gladly helps others, and she does not portray herself as a victim. Therefore, the motivation of greed seems unlikely.

Since the marriage of Mr. and Mrs. Lorrimer is not described in the narrative, it can be difficult to speculate about what it may have been like. But since Mr. Lorrimer is only rarely mentioned in the narrative, one might suggest that it may have been a difficult marriage. If love was a big part of their relationship, one might suggest that Mr. Lorrimer would have been mentioned more often. The fact that Mrs. Lorrimer is certain that she has murdered her husband, while Poirot dismisses it, also supports the idea that the relationship may have been a negative or abusive one.

Another telling fact is that Mrs. Lorrimer is able to live alone in a mansion, despite being a widow. This may point to her having murdered her husband to take over their home. This notion may support the possible motivation of greed. The motivation of greed as the motive for Mr. Lorrimer’s murder becomes more plausible when the fact that Mrs. Lorrimer is not described as having a job is added into the narrative. One could argue that this frames Mrs. Lorrimer as a femme fatale, or a spoiled wife who simply waited for her husband to die before she took over his property. This may be a simplification of her character, because she can be perceived as an independent kindhearted woman who enjoys playing bridge. Therefore, greed seem to be an unlikely motive for her husband’s murder.

Kristeva argues that violence in and of itself is part of the abject, because it confronts the boundaries between good and evil. Therefore, a murder or a suicide is part of the abject in and of itself, but if the murderer does not show guilt for the murder they’ve committed, the abject becomes ambiguous, and this can enhance the abjection and discomfort¹³⁵. One might suggest that Mrs. Lorrimer does not show guilt for the murder she committed, though she clearly admits to it, even when she is told that by Hercule Poirot that this murder is not so

¹³⁴ Bronfen, 2010:74-76

¹³⁵ Kristeva, 1982:13

severe. One might suggest that Mrs. Lorrimer’s acknowledgement of the murder and lack of guilt come from the fact that the murder was committed in self-defense. One could further advance the suggestion that the most likely reason for Mrs. Lorrimer to commit murder in self-defense is domestic violence, and this can increase the discomfort. Instead of just being a greedy housewife, Mrs. Lorrimer becomes a victim of domestic violence who does not necessarily see any way out other than to murder her husband. One could argue that the discomfort here is increased because the violence does not come from a strange environment but from someone’s home, which would usually signify safety. If one interprets the motivation for Mr. Lorrimer’s murder to be domestic violence, one could also interpret the murder in itself as a self-defense against some kind of physical assault. Therefore, one can also analyze the character development of Mrs. Lorrimer as one from an independent woman to a tragic dying former victim of domestic violence. But one can also analyze Mrs. Lorrimer’s character arc as the narrative of a triumphant woman who survived domestic violence and managed to move on from it. Makinen argues that Christie’s female characters are more active and independent than other female characters in crime fiction of the time, because they are often presented as actors in their own stories instead of bystanders¹³⁶. And one could argue that this motif of independence can be seen in Mrs. Lorrimer’s character, because instead of becoming a relatively passive victim of domestic violence, she becomes an active agent who decides to change her own situation. One can therefore conclude that the motive of greed is barely part of Mrs. Lorrimer’s character arc. One can argue that the motives that are most present in Mrs. Lorrimer’s character arc are self-defense and self-preservation. The moral message becomes that you should change the situation yourself if you’re a victim of domestic violence, which can be a dangerous message, because not all victims of domestic violence can change their own situation. But one can also conclude that this character arc bears the positive message that being a victim of domestic violence does not define you as a person. It also poses the question of when it is acceptable to murder someone, and whether those who commit murder in self-defense should be blamed for their murder.

Anne Meredith, victimhood and crime

Anne Meredith is a young student who is revealed to be a kleptomaniac. She is also revealed to have poisoned a woman she worked for¹³⁷. But she tends to present herself as a nervous and scared young woman. Therefore, one can detect a dissonance between the persona Anne

¹³⁶ Makinen,, 2006:5

¹³⁷ Christie, 2010:419-462

Meredith wishes to create for herself and the character she is actually portrayed as in the narrative. The moral message that can emerge is that you should not pretend to be a person you’re not. This can also be seen as a moral exploration of hypocrisy, because Anne Meredith builds a façade that can show a different character than who she really is.

Rhoda Dawes describes Anne Meredith as ‘Born of poor, honest parents’¹³⁸, and this can describe Anne as a victim of poverty. But one can also see this portrayal of Anne Meredith as sympathetic, because it can signify someone who is pure, decent and innocent. Therefore, one can perceive that Anne Meredith wishes to be seen as a hard-working, honest woman who is an innocent victim of her circumstances.

Anne Meredith’s name can also be interpreted as symbolic. ‘Anne’, her first name, is Hebrew, and means ‘grace’ while ‘Meredith’ is Celtic, and means ‘great leader’. One can interpret her name as what she aspires to be, and argue that she both wishes to be forgiven for her stealing and to gain and maintain a high status. The notion of grace or mercy, one could argue, symbolizes the fact that Anne Meredith is at the mercy of her own mental illness. Then, the duality of her character can become clear in her name, because it both shows her as a victim of mental illness and shows her wish for a high status. In the later parts of the narrative, one can interpret her name as ironic, because she is never forgiven and loses her status in the failed murder attempt¹³⁹.

Anne Meredith chooses to put herself in the victim-role by seeming scared and nervous, and this can be seen clearly in her first appearance. She is clearly anxious and shows fear of the host, Shaitana¹⁴⁰. One can interpret this appearance as an act, intended to make her seem like a more innocent victim who needs to be pitied. This notion is supported by the way Anne Meredith acts during the first interrogation. She acts scared, starts crying and barely dares to touch the murder weapon. Therefore, she is released from the interrogation early, and Superintendent is scared that she will not be able to stand being interrogated for long¹⁴¹. Thus, one might suggest that this victimhood act does work, because Anne Meredith can be underestimated because of it, and both the detectives and the readers doubt that Meredith could be a murderer. One might also suggest that this part of the narrative introduces the manipulation motif, because it shows how Anne Meredith can manipulate her way out of an interrogation.

¹³⁸ Christie, 2010:285-287

¹³⁹ Christie, 2010:548-549

¹⁴⁰ Christie, 2010:28-31

¹⁴¹ Christie, 2010:110-119

Anne Meredith is also revealed to have a psychological illness. She has kleptomania, and this has led to her stealing to escape her own poverty¹⁴². This psychological illness, one could argue, enhances the motif of victimhood, because Meredith cannot be blamed for her own mental illness. But one could interpret Meredith’s kleptomania as introducing the motif of crime into her character. Stealing can be read as a crime in and of itself and on top of that she chooses to murder in order to keep up her status.

It is revealed that Anne Meredith was a personal assistant to several different women, and that she stole from them¹⁴³. And even if this motive of theft does make her a victim of mental illness, it does also make the motif of crime ambiguous in Kristeva’s terms, because Meredith commits crime without feeling guilt, and this can make the crime more abject. This effect is further enhanced by the fact that she is stealing from old women, some of whom are severely ill.

She does also murder someone that she stole from¹⁴⁴, and this is all the more abject because she murders someone because she wishes to keep up her own status. She thus becomes more abject both because she murders someone without guilt and because she murders someone innocent. Mrs. Benson, Meredith’s murder victim, did not create or encourage the mental illness; on the contrary, by uncovering Anne Meredith’s stealing, Mrs. Benson wishes to stop the illness. One could argue that this is someone who tried to help Anne Meredith and was murdered for doing so.

Anne Meredith can also be interpreted as the only one who commits a crime with the readers as witnesses. She tries to murder Rhoda Dawes because she informed the police about the murder that Anne Meredith committed. Anne Meredith tries to drown Rhoda Dawes, but dies herself in the attempt¹⁴⁵. One could argue that this murder attempt contributes to cementing Meredith as a criminal, because it clearly shows her as murderous and dangerous. She also makes almost the opposite transformation to that of Mrs. Lorrimer, because she goes from presenting herself as a damsel in distress to becoming a femme fatale. The transformation may be caused by a tonal shift in her character, whereby she was formerly seen as a scared damsel in distress and is now seen as a manipulative active woman. There are several motifs that become clearer once she is revealed to be a criminal. The first motif is the manipulation motif, as it is shown that she has manipulated those around her into believing her innocent victim

¹⁴² Christie, 2010:462

¹⁴³ Christie, 2010:336-462

¹⁴⁴ Christie, 2010:336--462

¹⁴⁵ Christie, 2010:548-549

persona. The second motif is a murderous motif, which is shown to be part of the narrative when she actually tries to murder Rhoda Dawes¹⁴⁶. There is also a motif of seduction, when Anne Meredith tries to seduce Major Despard. But the most interesting aspect of Anne Meredith is that she does not make a successful femme fatale. She is unsuccessful both in murdering Rhoda Dawes and in seducing Major Despard, and when she decides to truly become criminal she also dies. One can conclude that there are several moral messages that can be taken from Anne Meredith’s character arc. The first is that murder never pays, but the second is that hypocrisy is wrong. The warning against hypocrisy is a moral message that one can derive from Meredith’s character arc because she builds a façade of being a good honest person but turns out to be a criminal who hurts older women. The third moral message to be drawn from Meredith’s arc is that one should stay in the position in the hierarchy that one is born into. This moral message comes from the fact that Anne Meredith is poor and becomes a kleptomaniac because she wishes to be as rich as those from the upper middle class.

Anne Meredith, murder and suicide

The final part of Anne Meredith’s narrative includes a hidden mystery that the narrative does not necessarily solve. The mystery is, was Anne Meredith involved in a tragic accident or did she commit suicide? This question does not necessarily explore the moral dilemma of suicide; it rather asks whether suicide can be a just punishment for murder or whether the murder suspect should be placed in jail. This can add the moral question of what justice and injustice are, and how one should separate the two.

Anne Meredith does attempt to murder Rhoda Dawes by drowning her¹⁴⁷. The only element of the narrative that can justify this murder is that Rhoda Dawes discloses the fact that Mrs. Benson died. Rhoda Dawes does not suspect this death to be a murder, but rather explains it as a horrible accident. This can actually make Rhoda Dawes into a stereotypical character, because up until this point she has been a kind, caring, supportive character with an interest in murder mysteries, but when Anne Meredith attempts to drown her, one might suggest that Dawes becomes a damsel in distress. Therefore, one might suggest that a moral aspect that emerges from this part of the narrative is how manipulation, seduction and violence can affect those around Meredith negatively.

Anne Meredith is described as quite a talented swimmer; therefore, one might suggest that this was not an accident. Anne Meredith also knew that Rhoda Dawes could not swim

¹⁴⁶ Christie, 2010:548-549

¹⁴⁷ Christie, 2010:548-549

and therefore she planned to drown her¹⁴⁸. One can interpret this scene as a murder-suicide, since Meredith’s ability to swim is emphasized; therefore, one could argue that she planned to murder Rhoda Dawes and then kill herself. One could argue that this murder-suicide was planned because she found out that the police and Poirot had discovered her kleptomania and she could no longer keep up her status and façade.

One could also ask whether Major Despard tried to save her or only saved Rhoda Dawes. He is described as jumping into the water and taking only Dawes back to land¹⁴⁹. One can interpret this scene in many different narrative directions. The first interpretation is that he tried to save both Anne Meredith and Rhoda Dawes, but managed only to reach Dawes. The second interpretation is that he also attempted to save Anne Meredith, but she refused his help. The third interpretation one can take from this scene is that Major Despard decided to save only Rhoda Dawes, because she is his love interest. This interpretation may go against the portrayal of the both of them, because Rhoda Dawes has previously shown a lot of care for Anne Meredith, while one can interpret Anne Meredith as having attempted to seduce Major Despard. He is also a military man who has previously worked as a soldier and a bodyguard, and so he considers it an honor to save others. The first interpretation can lead to an interpretation of the death as an accident, while the second interpretation sees the scene as a suicide. But if Anne Meredith has attempted to seduce Major Despard, one could interpret her pushing him away as illogical. At the same time, even though the scene in which Major Despard and Anne Meredith have a conversation can suggest a seduction motif, he does contact her. There are no descriptions of their conversation, except for the fact that Major Despard encourages Anne Meredith to contact a lawyer. Therefore, one might suggest that there is no seduction motif in Anne Meredith’s character, and if there is no seduction motif then the second interpretation of this scene is more probable, and this scene is one of suicide, in which Anne Meredith refuses help.

Another question is whether Anne Meredith planned the suicide or if she committed suicide because she realized that she could not succeed in murdering Rhoda Dawes. If she planned the suicide and the murder all along, then one could argue that this strongly enhances the manipulation motif, while it may reduce the seduction motif. The planned murder-suicide could make Anne Meredith a less sympathetic character, because it makes her more manipulative and calculating. The attempted murder of Rhoda Dawes can also become more

¹⁴⁸ Christie, 2010:540-549

¹⁴⁹ Christie, 2010:548-550

abject, because Rhoda Dawes becomes a damsel in distress who only attempted to protect Anne Meredith.

One can conclude that the motifs of murder and suicide in Anne Meredith’s character arc explore what injustice is and how it can work. The motif of suicide can also explore how those around a suicide victim can experience a suicide. This arc can explore how women can be violent and manipulative, albeit in a somewhat superficial manner.

Anne Meredith, mental illness and crime

Anne Meredith is a kleptomaniac and therefore one can find motifs of mental illness and trauma in her character. But there are also clear crime motifs in her character that cannot be excused by her mental illness. Therefore, one might suggest that the moral questions of these motifs relate to whether someone with mental illness can change and if the mental illness can excuse criminal actions the patient may commit.

Anne Meredith has lost her father, who was a military officer in India. One might suggest that she is inspired by him, because he was a high-ranking officer that maintained his high status throughout his life. She wishes to keep up a high status herself, and she and Rhoda Dawes do have a housekeeper. Therefore, the loss of her father, one could argue, may have fueled her mental illness, because it could have meant that her family became poor and she could no longer afford the luxuries she had been used to.

At the same time, one can condemn most of her thefts, because she steals from older women who cannot defend themselves. One can also advance the suggestion that she can manipulate these women into thinking that she is a poor victim that needs help, when in reality she uses these women to sustain her own collection of beautiful items. Therefore, even though her background may be tragic, one cannot argue that this excuses her theft.

But one could argue that she cannot control her need to steal, because of her kleptomania. This is especially emphasized in the scene in which Anne Meredith is asked by Poirot to sort out different kinds of silk stockings and steals two pairs. Here her mental illness is showed as uncontrollable and tragi-comical, because it is comical that she chooses to steal in front of Poirot, but it is tragic that she cannot control her impulse to steal.

One can also assume that Meredith’s mother has died, because she is not mentioned in the narrative. Therefore, one can further advance the suggestion that Anne Meredith has not inherited any money, since her mother was poor and could not afford to give her daughter what she needed. This notion can also emphasize the tragedy of a single mother who wants to take care of her daughter but cannot support her.

Her tragic background does not excuse the murder that Anne Meredith commits. One can also read the murder as premeditated, because she would have to have knowledge of where medicine and paint were stored, and when this medicine was given. She does murder an old sick woman by swapping out her medicine for paint, thus taking advantage of someone else’s illness to maintain her own status and mental illness. By hurting someone else to keep up her own status, Meredith displays a selfishness and self-indulgence that can hurt those around her, and this crime can be said to be worsened by her mental illness, because it is not likely that she would have committed these crimes if she had stable mental health.

At the beginning of the narrative, in the dinner scene, Anne Meredith shows a nervousness that borders on anxiety. This is especially clear when she speaks about Shaitana. But one could argue that there might be several different reasons for this fear; it could either be that everyone is afraid of Shaitana, because of his threatening demeanor, or it could be fear of retaliation, because Shaitana showed interest in Anne Meredith which she did not reciprocate. Therefore, she could fear that he could hurt her because she does not love him back. One can discuss whether the real source of Meredith’s fear is that she will be revealed to be poor, and a thief. This notion of fear of being revealed is supported in the interrogation scene, in which one can only read Anne Meredith as calm in the moment where Battle assures her that he only wishes to investigate those with secrets. One could argue that Anne Meredith calms down in this scene because she believes she can maintain her status. Therefore, even her fear can be seen as a part of the manipulation that Anne Meredith uses to maintain her status, and she can become a part of the devilish aspect of the abject. One can analyze Anne Meredith as a part of the devilish aspect of the abject because she is mysterious; no one knows exactly why she became a kleptomaniac or, in the beginning of the narrative, that she is a kleptomaniac. No one has any knowledge of her relatives or other friends and her death remains a mystery throughout the end of the narrative. She is also threatening, because she is actually a violent woman who hurts others and she is not afraid to hurt those who love and care for her. But she can also be seen as fascinating, because she decides not to change, and she uses her mental illness to her own advantage. She assumes a victim role in order to be able to maintain an upper middle-class lifestyle.

One can conclude that the moral elements of Anne Meredith’s character arc encompass mental illness and hypocrisy. The moral in this part of the narrative warns against building a façade that hides you, instead of healing your illness and becoming a mentally stable person. Instead of pretending to be a different person, this moral message encourages improving the person you are.

Chapter 3: Narrative consequences for ambiguous victims

One might suggest that moral ambiguity can have narrative consequences, especially where Lechte’s ambiguous victims are concerned. These narrative consequences are often structural, and often concern the buildup of suspense in a whodunit. Dennis Porter is a literary theoretician that has studied the structure and buildup of suspense in the whodunit. According to Porter, the structure of a whodunit should be easy to follow, but at the same time it should also be easy to vary, to avoid the structure becoming repetitive. Porter suggests that the most ideal structure comes from Greek tragedy, because it is well adapted to serialization. The tragic structure, which Aristotle contributed to creating, can both be fairly simply replicated and, because of the number of elements, leave room for quite a lot of variation. The suspense of a whodunit, according to Porter, comes from the crime puzzle in and of itself, or what he calls the unanswered question. Therefore, to avoid the suspense deflating, the answer to the unanswered question needs to be delayed. Delaying the suspense in a whodunit is achieved through what Porter calls techniques of delay¹⁵⁰. These techniques can both affect the characters and the structure, but in this chapter the focus will be on structural techniques of delay.

The narrative structure and buildup of suspense in a whodunit

Aristotle was a Greek philosopher and student of Plato, and he developed a theory to describe the moral aspects of fiction. In the view of Aristotle, humankind learns from mimicking others, and so tragedy was designed so that the audience could be cleansed of their own wrongdoings, and would not repeat the protagonist’s mistakes. This cleansing is called catharsis, and Aristotle argues that catharsis is the combination of two different emotions. The first is fear, in that the audience should fear ending up in a situation similar to that of the protagonists. The second pity, in that the audience should pity the heroes of the tragedy¹⁵¹.

Aristotle argued that catharsis could be reached through the structure of a tragedy, which he roughly divided into six parts. The first part is the exposition, which is a presentation of characters, setting, plot and conflict. The second part is hubris, which is the point where the protagonists defy the Greek gods. The third part is the climax, which is the high point of the tragedy’s tension¹⁵². The fourth point is the peripeteia, where the circumstances of the tragedy are turned against the protagonists. The fifth part is pathos; that

¹⁵⁰ Porter, 1991:248-251

¹⁵¹ Aristotle, 2007

¹⁵² Aristotle, 2007

is, the point of the tragedy which showcases the protagonists’ suffering. The sixth part is the anagnorisis, which is also known as the point of recognition, where the protagonists realize that their hamartia or tragic flaw caused the catastrophes of the tragedy¹⁵³.

Porter believes that the whodunit uses the Aristotelian structure, but as a means of entertainment, not for moral purposes. Therefore, he does not discuss hamartia and hubris, which are not necessarily removed from the structure, but are strictly moral in nature. Porter does not discuss exposition either, because this structural element does not undergo many changes from Greek tragedy to the whodunit¹⁵⁴.

The first element that Porter discusses is the climax, which in Greek tragedy is a buildup of tension. In the whodunit, the climax is often the first murder, which can enhance the effect of the introduced conflict, or other forms of crime in the beginning of the narrative¹⁵⁵. One could argue that the climax does not necessarily enhance the moral conflict in a whodunit, but merely the murder mystery.

The pathos is both in Greek tragedy and in the whodunit created by a scene of suffering. But in Greek tragedy this suffering is often only told to the audience and not shown, and it can be both psychological and physical. In the whodunit, the pathos relates to violent crimes, and more specifically to subsequent murders or murderous attempts in the narrative¹⁵⁶. These murders can delay the suspense according to Porter, because they can redirect the investigation from the old murder to the new murder or murderous attempt, thus avoiding deflation of the tension¹⁵⁷.

The peripeteia is in Greek tragedy both a structural and a moral element. It both enhances the effect of the circumstances by redirecting them and highlights the hamartia of the protagonist. In the whodunit, the peripeteia is strictly a structural element, which functions as a technique of delay¹⁵⁸. The peripeteia functions as a technique of delay because peripeteias can shift the reader’s suspicion from one suspect to another. This redirection can be read as a means of misleading the reader, because the actual murderer needs to be revealed as late in the narrative as possible for the tension to be maintained¹⁵⁹.

The anagnorisis is still a somewhat moral element in the whodunit, but whereas it is related to the protagonist in the Greek tragedy, the anagnorisis is related to the antagonist in

¹⁵³ Aristotle, 2007

¹⁵⁴ Porter, 1995:248-249

¹⁵⁵ Porter, 1995:248-249

¹⁵⁶ Porter, 1995:248-249

¹⁵⁷ Porter, 1995:250-251

¹⁵⁸ Porter, 1995:250-251

¹⁵⁹ Porter, 1995:250-251

the whodunit. The anagnorisis in the whodunit can be read as the scene in the narrative in which the murderer reveals what they have done¹⁶⁰. One could argue that the final scene in a whodunit can be seen as both structural and moral, since it both wraps up the puzzle and can reveal the motivation of the murderer.

One can conclude that the story and structural elements of Greek tragedy have been well adapted to the whodunit, but several features have been changed from concerning morals to simply concerning entertainment and suspense. Some of these elements can become an obstacle in the process for the readers solving the plot. These elements can increase the entertainment value for the readers.

Peripeteias and the shift of suspicion

The peripeteia is a structural element that is important both in Greek tragedy and in the whodunit. In Greek tragedy, the peripeteia increases the tension focused on the protagonist and can reveal the hamartia¹⁶¹. In the whodunit, the peripeteia increases the tension focused on the suspect, by moving the suspicion from one suspect to another¹⁶². This structural element can be moral in both Greek tragedy and the whodunit. In Greek tragedy, the peripeteia can contribute to warning against the hamartia. In the whodunit, the peripeteia can contribute to a transition from one exploration of a moral theme to another.

The peripeteia in a Greek tragedy both increases the tension focused on the protagonist and changes the circumstances of the tragedy. The peripeteia can contribute to a circular motion from the outside world to the protagonist and then back to the outside world. This circular motion can happen when the tragedy shows the state of the outside world, before the protagonist discovers that his hamartia may have caused this situation, before the consequences of his hamartia are shown more clearly in the narrative¹⁶³.

In a whodunit, the peripeteia can more often be a linear motion from one suspect to the next, which can mislead the readers and the detective. This motion may be called a technique of delay, because it delays the answer to the unanswered question and upholds the tension¹⁶⁴. Unlike in Greek tragedy, which usually has only one peripeteia, the whodunit might have several peripeteias, to make the puzzle more difficult to solve and extend the suspense. The larger number of peripeteias can introduce new moral themes as well.

¹⁶⁰ Porter, 1995:248-249

¹⁶¹ Aristotle, 2007

¹⁶² Porter, 1995:250-251

¹⁶³ Aristotle, 2007

¹⁶⁴ Porter, 1995:250-251

The peripeteia in a whodunit usually shifts attention from one suspect to the next, but it can also move from the murderer to the suspect. One might suggest that, in addition to increasing the suspense, the peripeteia can function as a transition from one moral arc to the next. In *Cards on the table*, one can observe that the majority of the narrative explores the moral theme of justice, but when the first peripeteia occurs and Mrs. Lorrimer becomes the suspect, the narrative explores forgiveness to a greater extent. In the second peripeteia, when Anne Meredith becomes the suspect, one can identify the exploration of mental illness, injustice and forgiveness as moral themes. In the end, when the last peripeteia reveals Dr. Roberts to be the murderer, one can identify hypocrisy as the moral theme being explored.

One could argue that the peripeteia can both lead the reader’s attention from one suspect to the next and from one suspect to an innocent witness. When the peripeteia leads to an innocent witness, the moral idea of justice and innocence in itself can be explored. These ideas are emphasized when the perspective changes to a new character who is seen as the suspect, and when the murderer is being revealed.

One can conclude that the peripeteia is both structural and moral in both Greek tragedy and the whodunit. But, in Greek tragedy, the peripeteia contributes to the condemnation of the hamartia. In the whodunit, the onus is on the structure and the entertainment value, as the peripeteia can divert the attention from the murderer to a suspect or witness. But the peripeteia can also create a change of moral theme when the suspect shifts, or the peripeteia can allow for a further exploration of an overarching moral theme, such as justice.

Shifting suspicion from murderer to victim

When the victim is ambiguous, the victim character can be criminal before they are murdered¹⁶⁵. One could argue that the ambiguous victim can thus both allow for the exploration of a new moral theme and can contribute to upholding the tension by prolonging the answer to the unanswered question. The victim can also juxtapose the previous moral theme with another, by introducing a new moral theme via their crime.

One can observe that the first question that may be asked when a victim is suspected to be ambiguous is whether they had hidden motives while alive. Were all their actions meant to serve the just cause of preventing crime, if they functioned as suspects? Or did they serve their own criminal goals? One might suggest that these questions can both prolong the answer to the unanswered question and add nuance to the character. Instead of just being a

¹⁶⁵ Lechte, 2010:55

sympathetic character, the victim becomes more complex. Even though the character can thus become less sympathetic, the interest of the character may increase.

The question of whether the victim has committed a crime may expand on the character and add even more nuance. This question is also broadened when the kind of crime that the victim may have committed before their murder is not specified. If the crime was nonviolent, it may be easier for the readers to defend than if it was a violent crime, but this hierarchy can be reversed depending on the harm that the victim causes others.

The victim’s crimes can to some extent excuse the murder, but special conditions must occur for the murder to be excusable. The first condition is that the victim must have a closer relation to the murderer than usual: for example, as a spouse. The second condition is that the victim must have caused grave trauma to the murderer, either physical or mental. The third condition is that the victim can be interpreted as having directly threatened the murderer’s life. Narratively, the defense of the murder becomes a part of the anagnorisis, because the defense is functioning as justification for the murder but does not mean that the murder is without consequences for the murderer.

One could argue that these conditions do also apply when it comes to excusing the murderer of the ambiguous victim. If the murderer has their own egotistical motivations for murder, the murderer cannot be excused. If the motivation is, for example, greed, the murderer is not excused even if the victim is a threatening, violent criminal. If, however the victim is violent while the murderer is simply protecting themselves against the victim, the murderer can be excused. But the murderer can only be excused if they do not harm others beyond the victim. Likewise, the excuse or defense of the murderer becomes part of the anagnorisis as justification for the murder but does not absolve the murderer of consequences, unless the murder was committed for altruistic reasons.

One can conclude that when suspicion transfers from murderer to victim, the narrative structure transitions from somewhat linear to somewhat circular because the focus is on the character that introduced the conflict, instead of on the character that caused the conflict. Therefore, the transition from murderer to suspect can function as a technique of delay, because it upholds the tension of the unanswered question by reverting to the question itself instead of continuing to solve it. But when the suspicion is transferred from murderer to victim, the murder can be justified, especially if it was committed in self-defense. The murderer is still arrested or punished by the narrative if the murder was committed for egotistical reasons.

Transfer of suspicion and its effect on the narrative

When the suspicion is transferred, this can have an effect on the narrative. The transfer of suspicion can change the motion of the narrative from linear to circular. It can also change the characters and make them more nuanced. Or the types that the characters started as at the beginning of the narrative can be changed quite radically at the end of the narrative. The narrative structure, however, is what is the most affected by the transfer of suspicion. The narrative structure can become either more linear or more circular, depending on the character that is suspected. One could advance that the moral goes through similar changes, thus the moral themes are conveyed in either a linear or circular motion depending on the new character that is suspected.

If the suspicion is transferred from the murderer to a suspect, the narrative structure moves forward and thus remains linear, while functioning as a technique of delay¹⁶⁶. The murderer and the suspect can both be seen from new perspectives. Whereas the murderer can become more sympathetic and less suspicious with the transition, the new suspect can become more suspicious and less sympathetic. Their types can also be changed slightly, for example by adding an extra personality trait. When the suspicion is transferred from the murderer to a suspect, the moral themes create a linear motion from one theme to another. This transition allows the moral themes to be exchanged quite unnoticed and the moral theme that is newly explored can be seen as suitable to the character undergoing investigation.

If the suspicion is transferred from the murderer to a witness, one might suggest that the narrative can become somewhat more circular, because the witness must be absolved of false accusations before the narrative can continue. In the scenario of the witness being under suspicion, the murderer does not necessarily become a more nuanced character. There can, however, be more nuance to the witness character. This nuance may increase when the witness is absolved of suspicion, but the witness character does not necessarily change type. The witness does not usually play a larger role in the narrative after being under suspicion. The moral theme does change and justice and innocence in and of itself can become moral themes in the narrative.

When the suspicion shifts from murderer to victim, one could argue that the structure becomes circular, because the narrative reverts back to the starting point of the conflict. The murderer and victim can become more nuanced characters. The murderer and the victim can also change type: for example, from damsel in distress to femme fatale, or from sympathetic

¹⁶⁶ Porter, 1995:250-251

doctor to murderer without scruples. The change can make the characterization more interesting, because the change can highlight previously unknown character traits. The shift of suspicion from murderer to victim could cause the moral theme to revert back to the original moral theme, namely hubris.

One can conclude that the peripeteia and shift in suspicion affect two different aspects of the narrative. The first and most prominent effect is on the structure itself, changing the direction and forming the shape of the structure. The shift in suspicion affects the narrative the most when the suspicion is transferred to a completely innocent character. The peripeteia can also affect the portrayal of characters. When the backstory of the characters is revealed, the characters can become more nuanced.

Todorov and the two-part separation of the narrative

Tzvetan Todorov is a formalist and a crime fiction theoretician. He has in his essay ‘The typology of crime fiction’ defined the rules and structure of crime fiction. He does, like Malmgren, divide the crime fiction genre into two different genres, the hardboiled crime story and the whodunit, which are written by different rules¹⁶⁷. When Todorov analyzes the whodunit, he believes that the narrative follows the rules of SS van Dine, but that the structure, unlike Porter’s, structure is divided into two parts. The first part includes all events prior to the first murder, the second part includes all events after the first murder¹⁶⁸.

Todorov calls the first part of the narrative the story of the crime. The story of the crime tells the story of the first murder. This story is almost exclusively told in retrospect¹⁶⁹. It can be read as the key to the solution to the murder mystery and is usually told in fragments during interrogation. This story is also summarized in the final scene of the whodunit and includes all crimes that are in direct correlation to the first murder¹⁷⁰. This story can have one concrete moral theme, that can be explored each time the story of the crime is discussed in the narrative.

The second part of the narrative is called the story of the investigation. This story is told in the present and depicts the investigation of the first murder¹⁷¹. This story usually portrays all forms of investigation, both the crime scene investigations and interrogations. In addition to the original investigation, the story of the investigation also portrays all analysis of

¹⁶⁷ Todorov, 1995

¹⁶⁸ Todorov, 1995:205

¹⁶⁹ Todorov, 1995:205

¹⁷⁰ Todorov, 1995:205

¹⁷¹ Todorov, 1995:205

fingerprints and of the dead body. When new murders occur, the story of the investigation depicts the investigation of the subsequent murders¹⁷². In the story of the investigation new moral themes can be introduced. Since the story of the investigation can be said to be quite dynamic one could argue that the moral themes can be thoroughly explored in this part of the narrative.

When the suspicion is transferred from one character to the next, one could argue that the narrative goes from depicting the story of the investigation to the story of the crime. One can discuss whether this shift can happen regardless of whether the character that the suspicion shifts onto is a suspect, a witness or the victim. But one might suggest that the narrative reverts back to the story of the crime for a greater part of the narrative when the victim is the one under suspicion. This reversion may take up a larger part of the narrative because the reversion is necessary to show a clear motivation for the murder. The reversion can also include the original moral theme that can be somewhat explored in the victim’s part of the narrative.

One can conclude that Todorov’s two-part structure is an overarching structure that dictates how the narrative should be arranged. The story of the crime details how the murders happen, while the story of the investigation details how the murder mystery is resolved. The story of the crime is told in retrospect, while the story of the investigation is told in the present. When the suspicion shifts, the narrative transitions from the story of the investigation to the story of the crime.

The focalization and change of focalization in the narrative

Gerard Genette is a literary theoretician who has contributed to the study of narratology. The study of narratology is the study of how a narrative is told. The focalization is the point of view from which the narrative is told¹⁷³. In *Cards on the table*, the narrative is told in the third person and each narrator knows less than the readers. The focalization changes throughout the narrative, but it is mostly Hercule Poirot that is the point of focalization.

When the narrative transitions from one focalization to another, the transition marks a new environment. For example, in the chapter in which Dr. Roberts is interrogated by Superintendent Battle, the focalization has shifted from Poirot to Battle, because the narrative occurs in an environment where Poirot is not present. The usual changes in focalization in *Cards on the table* occur between the detectives.

¹⁷² Todorov, 1995:205

¹⁷³ Genette, 1983:190-199

But, at the beginning of the narrative, the focalization changes from Poirot, the detective, to Shaitana, the first victim¹⁷⁴. One could argue that the change in focalization can allow the reader to see the victim’s point of view more clearly. This change in focalization allows the reader to sympathize more with the victim or to see what the victim thinks of their circumstances. In Anne Meredith’s case, one can observe how she plans her murderous attempt¹⁷⁵. Shaitana’s focalization in the beginning of the narrative can similarly explain why he invites Poirot¹⁷⁶. One can observe that these focalizations of the victims can contribute both to sympathy with them and to their revelation as ambiguous victims. These revelations can nuance the victim characters or gradually reveal their original nature. One could argue that these revelations can also allow for an exploration into what criminals actually are, and a further expansion on the theme of hypocrisy.

Another form of focalization is the focalization of the witnesses, which one could argue is usually utilized to expand a character’s backstory and provide further motivation for the murders. These focalizations of the witnesses can also explain what crimes the suspects have previously committed and provide motivations for their previous crimes. The focalization of the witness can give insight into their personality as well, and one can observe that such focalizations can provide more nuance to the witness. One could further argue that the witness can give insight into the victim of the original crime, to explore more moral themes: for example, to further expand on the theme of injustice.

The focal point or point of view of most of the narrative is Poirot. When the focalization is transferred to another detective, this can add evidence to the case and contribute to introducing a moral theme, while introducing a new environment. When the focalization is transferred to the victim, the victim’s character can become more nuanced. But the victim can also be revealed to be an ambiguous victim, by revealing their criminal plans. When the focalization is on the witness, the suspect’s backstory can be developed, and the victims of the suspect’s crime can be introduced, making them a nuanced character.

¹⁷⁴ Christie, 2010:8-10

¹⁷⁵ Christie, 2010:540-549

¹⁷⁶ Christie, 2010:17-19

Chapter 4 Moral themes

The implicit presence of moral issues in *Cards on the table* often emerges from elements of moral dilemma, related to actual actions in the plot. A number of those actions include choices that raises moral issues without being actual crimes. These may include manipulation, lying, adultery, breaking promises and gossip. Even though such actions may not be considered illegal by the readers, they may be seen as immoral, in that they could cause damage to others, either physically or mentally. Moral issues also emerge in relation to actual criminal actions. These, in turn, can be divided in two groups: on the one hand, nonviolent crimes, which can include theft, fraud, blackmail and bribery, and on the other hand, violent crimes, such as beatings, assaults, attempted murder and murder. By exploring characters’ actions and the actual crimes that occur in the novel, this chapter argues that four different moral areas form the core of the moral problems addressed throughout the plot in *Cards on the table*, most often without being explicitly addressed: hubris, hypocrisy, forgiveness and justice.

Crimes depicted in Cards on the table

Cards on the table presents a variety of crimes. Those crimes may, each in their own way, affect their perpetrators in different ways. Considered in relation to moral questions, the various types of crimes in many ways present a hierarchical structure, ranging from nonviolent crimes as the least serious to murder as the most serious. This hierarchy is reflected in the characters’ reactions to those actions. Even though one could argue that almost everyone who has committed crime in the narrative is punished indirectly via murder, those who damage others the most are those who are the most heavily condemned in moral terms. At the same time, in *Cards on the table*, the least violent crimes often appear to be the most damaging, when one considers those affected by the crimes. The psychological exploration that Agatha Christie proposes of these criminals, allows an exploration of the moral consequences of those various kinds of crime, and, ultimately, permits us to extract some moral stands regarding the four main areas discussed in this chapter. Since the moral approach in the text is closely linked to the nature of each crime, and since the grading of the various crimes is crucial to the development of Christie’s careful and suggestive moral thought, the hierarchical order of crime types needs to be firmly established.

The first crime, which can be seen as lowest in the crime hierarchy, is theft. Theft could be seen as a nonviolent crime, which usually hurts society the least. On the other hand, theft appears as the most hurtful crime in *Cards on the table*, especially when considered from the point of view of the victim. The victims of theft in *Cards on the table* are older women, many of them struggling with severe medical problems¹⁷⁷. The fact that Anne Meredith decides to steal from elderly women clearly makes her a less sympathetic woman. The very character of Anne Meredith almost appears as a moral statement in itself, as she hurts those who are clearly weaker than herself. Not only is she depicted as a criminal; she is shown to be a criminal who seeks to harm others, choosing as her victims those she would hurt the most. It is hard not to read the very character of Anne Meredith as a moral condemnation. This is underscored by the relationship between Anne Meredith and those she steals from, which could be seen as a parasitic addiction. Anne Meredith works as a personal assistant to the elderly women, not primarily because she wants to help them or because she wants to earn her salary from working for them, but because they are in possession of beautiful valuables that she can steal. The crime of theft shows Meredith to be a parasitic addict who does all within her power to steal valuables and thereby maintain her upper middle-class lifestyle. Even if theft may seem like a petty crime when compared to other offenses, it certainly is presented both as a strongly damaging action and as a parasitic crime.

Another crime that is a part of the narrative is blackmail. Like theft, this is a nonviolent crime, but at the same time a crime that could be accompanied by violence or threats. Usually the goal of blackmail is not only to tarnish someone’s reputation but also monetary gain. However, in Shaitana’s case, he only wants to destroy others’ reputations to maintain his own social status¹⁷⁸. One could suggest that he wishes to gain a higher social status by revealing a murderer, so that he could be seen as a hero who saved the city from a murdering doctor. But the readers do not know whether Shaitana’s suspicions are true at the beginning of the narrative. Therefore, one might suggest that Shaitana threatens others either to better his own reputation, or simply for his own entertainment. In either case, these actions are hardly presented in a way that approves of them as moral actions. On the contrary, here again, Christie seems to condemn such behavior. The lack of motivation can render the character Shaitana abject, in Kristeva’s use of the word, since he blackmails and threatens others without feeling guilt. Following Kristeva’s argument, the lack of guilt would make the

¹⁷⁷ Christie, 2010:336-462

¹⁷⁸ Christie, 2010:5-300

character of Shaitana ambiguous, in her definition of the term, because he believes that blackmail is justified when blackmail stops murderers¹⁷⁹.

Violence also occurs *Cards on the table*, but it cannot be seen as prominent. Violence is more carefully incorporated into the narrative, often implicitly, especially in the murder scenes. As discussed in the previous chapter, violence could arguably also be an element in the relationship between Mr. and Mrs. Lorrimer¹⁸⁰. Violence, then, is a part of the narrative, but the focus is on the more visible crimes, such as theft or murder. Rather, one has to read violence between the lines. However, this violent undertone enhances the moral layer of the narrative. It reminds the reader that violence and crime are serious issues that raise questions that need to be addressed. The implicit narrative thread that most actively emphasizes the gravity of such violence is probably the implied domestic violence in the relationship of Mr. and Mrs. Lorrimer¹⁸¹. This narrative line underscores a severe problem that has increasingly been considered with more attention in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, and which Christie addresses, even though implicitly, at a very early stage. The question of domestic violence is not directly raised, but, as previously suggested, it appears through the character of Mrs. Lorrimer via several different themes. The first is the guilt motive, which is displayed when she discusses the murder of her husband. The second motive is that of shame motive. Mrs. Lorrimer can be seen as shameful when the murder of her husband is mentioned. The third motive is fear. One could suggest that Mrs. Lorrimer confesses because she fears that Anne Meredith has suffered the same experience of violence and murder as her.

One step above on the graded scale of crime hierarchies, we find attempted murder, which can be read as a severe crime, but one which often turns out to be difficult to punish by law. Attempted murder is usually hidden, and can be difficult to detect. In Anne Meredith’s case, the attempted murder is discovered while it is happening¹⁸², which certainly makes it easier to classify this particular action as a crime. A murder attempt may also seem more serious when the victim is innocent, as in this case. The crime can also be seen as a traumatic event that affects the victim in the future. This, too, arguably increases the gravity of the crime. In Christie’s case, the point of view from which the crime comes is that of Anne Meredith herself¹⁸³. Returning to Kristeva’s vocabulary, this would make the crime of attempted murder more abject, because the readers are made to side with the criminal. Thus,

¹⁷⁹ Kristeva, 1982:13

¹⁸⁰ Christie, 2010:479-482

¹⁸¹ Christie, 2010:479-482

¹⁸² Christie, 2010:548-549

¹⁸³ Christie, 2010:548-549

they can see how the criminal considers herself to be doing the right thing. The fact that Anne Meredith does not see herself as guilty of attempted murder makes her part of both Kristeva’s two categories of the abject and the ambiguous,¹⁸⁴ because she fails to see that it would be wrong to murder Rhoda Dawes. Anne Meredith tries to murder Rhoda Dawes not out of revenge for something horrible that Dawes has done, or for a crime she has committed. She simply tries to murder her because Dawes tried to protect Meredith from being confronted with what Dawes identified as a past trauma. She chooses to hurt others for monetary reasons and does not find this wrong in any way.

The most prominent and prevalent crime, at the top of the crime hierarchy in *Cards on the table*, is certainly murder. Murder is the crime that is in the center of the narrative and murder creates the mystery that the readers need to solve. Murder is a part of the intrinsic motivation of the overall narrative. Curiously, the total number of murders is also higher when compared to other crimes in *Cards on the table*. The novel includes one account of a murder attempt, two accounts of blackmail, two accounts of theft and roughly seven accounts of murder¹⁸⁵. With their position as the most prominent crimes, the crimes that receive the most attention, these murders also create the basis of what one could consider the most central moral thoughts in *Cards on the table*.

Some of these murders can be seen as acts of hubris, because the murderer might have expected that the murder would not be exposed.

The act of murder can also reveal the socially hierarchical and deterministic structure of *Cards on the table*. This hierarchical structure almost demands that the characters stay within their social class or they will be punished for having tried to be recognized or for achieving a higher status. The characters who arguably get the hardest punishments in the text are the characters who are the most socially mobile. Shaitana, who goes from being an immigrant to being part of the upper middle class, is the first character who is murdered¹⁸⁶. Anne Meredith, who goes from being poor to becoming part of the upper middle class seems to commit suicide¹⁸⁷. The question of social mobility, or rather the danger of such mobility, might be seen as another major moral issue in *Cards on the table*. Agatha Christie here clearly opts for a rather conservative stand, addressing the issue of social mobility, but showing how society punishes such social ambitions.

¹⁸⁴ Kristeva, 1982:13

¹⁸⁵ Christie, 2010:57-500

¹⁸⁶ Christie, 2010:5-57

¹⁸⁷ Christie, 2010:336-549

Since many of the murders are situated in the past, one could argue that forgiveness would be another moral theme. Is it possible to forgive a past crime? The question is never raised explicitly, but dwells under the surface throughout the text.

One can conclude that the range of crimes presented in *Cards on the table* depicts moral undertones in different, equally graded ways. The violent crimes, which can be read as most prevalent, lead to moral questions concerning justice, exploring the dichotomy between justice and injustice. The nonviolent crimes can lead to a moral layer related to social class and how dependent the characters are on their social status. The immoral actions and blackmail lead to an implicit line of moral enquiry concerning hypocrisy and a warning against hubris.

Motivations for murder and their moral implications

There are many different motivations for murder, and those motivations often lead to exploration of different moral themes. These moral themes present a hierarchical structure that mirrors that of the different crimes present in the narrative. The different actions commented on and presented by Christie in *Cards on the table* are, from a moral point of view, organized into a hierarchical structure according to how selfless the motivation may seem. This hierarchy of motivation is also decided by the perceived necessity of the murder.

One could advance the suggestion that the lowest place in the motivation hierarchy is occupied by self-defense. Protecting one’s health can be seen as more important than letting the abuser survive, and one might suggest that the self-defense motivation is part of the reason why Mrs. Lorrimer is presented in a somewhat sympathetic way at the end of her character arc¹⁸⁸. One question that occurs is that of whether or not it is fair to judge Mrs. Lorrimer for protecting herself against violence. Another question is that of whether or not Mrs. Lorrimer should be forgiven for murdering her husband when he was violent. Makinen argues that the female characters in Christie’s fiction can be read as independent¹⁸⁹. Can one argue that Mrs. Lorrimer is portrayed as an independent woman when she is being punished for liberating herself from her violent husband? Even though Mrs. Lorrimer is portrayed as independent and sympathetic, she is also dying, and she is murdered during the narrative. Even if the murder of her husband was necessary, one could argue that it is condemned by the narrative, because she suffers dire consequences for it.

¹⁸⁸ Christie, 2010:479-500

¹⁸⁹ Makinen, 2006:5

The second tier of the motivation hierarchy would be mental illness. The motivation of mental illness stems from self-preservation, but it is not entirely deliberate either. The notion of deliberate action can however be somewhat rooted in greed, because Anne Meredith suffers from kleptomania and seeks to escape poverty by stealing¹⁹⁰. The notion of greed could emphasize the moral theme of social mobility, because it portrays Anne Meredith’s wish to ascend the social hierarchy as a mental illness. The mental illness can also be disregarded because Anne Meredith decides not to treat her illness, and hence stagnates instead of changing. Unlike Mrs. Lorrimer, who becomes more sympathetic when she liberates herself from violence, one could argue that Anne Meredith becomes less sympathetic, because her liberation and independence is caused by crime and subsequent violence¹⁹¹. Therefore, one could also say that Mrs. Lorrimer and Anne Meredith represent two different sides of the same debate. Where Mrs. Lorrimer moves past the trauma and becomes a functioning member of society, Anne Meredith instead allows her mental illness to assist her in climbing in the social hierarchy. Therefore, while Mrs. Lorrimer is commended for staying in the upper middle-class, Anne Meredith is almost condemned for the same kind of behavior. One could argue that the condemnation is not necessarily connected to the social class to which Anne Meredith belongs, but to how she received and maintained that social status. Anne Meredith decided to let her mental illness, which is probably rooted in greed, contribute to her ascent to her current social status, instead of getting treatment. Therefore, instead of her mental illness becoming a severe issue that is solved during the narrative, the mental illness could be read as an excuse for Anne Meredith to become violent and murderous. Hence, one could advance the suggestion that the greatest motivation of Anne Meredith’s crimes would not be mental illness, but rather the greed that the mental illness is based on, and the stagnation of the mental illness, instead of treatment.

The third tier of the motivation hierarchy could be defined as crime committed for one’s own gain. The motivation of gaining something could indeed be seen as selfish. The motivation of gain can also be divided into two different categories. The first category would be the desire to gain money, and this motivation for crime can be defined as greed. The motivation of greed is best seen in Anne Meredith, because greed forms the basis of her mental illness. Greed can also be seen as part of Dr. Roberts’ motivation for murder. He murders Mr. Craddock, Shaitana and Mrs. Lorrimer to avoid losing the money he makes as a

¹⁹⁰ Christie, 2010:336-462

¹⁹¹ Christie, 2010:479-549

doctor. If he were to be exposed as a murderer, he would lose his license as a doctor¹⁹². The greed motif is, however, only implied, and only one part of the motivation in this case. The second category of the gain motivation for crime would be to gain status. For example, the motivation of gaining status can be seen as the motivation behind Shaitana’s blackmail. Gaining status can be seen as the motivation partially responsible for Anne Meredith’s crimes as well. The motivation of gain can contribute to introducing the moral theme of hubris. Hubris can be defined as rebelling against authorities above one’s abilities, and it can be defined as a typical character trait in Greek tragedy. In the narrative of *Cards on the table*, one could argue that hubris appears when a character commits a crime that they expect not to be exposed as having committed, or when a character tries to solve a crime themselves instead of reporting the crime to the authorities. This moral message can be read as ‘committing crimes is wrong’. But it could also be a cautionary tale against committing crimes, because the narrative explains that one will be caught if one commit crimes. Hubris can also introduce a moral against ascending through the social hierarchy. The moral stand here would be the classic lesson of hubris: that if one gains a powerful position, one may lose it if one attempts to defy authority.

One can discuss whether the fourth tier in the hierarchy can be tied to the former motivation, because both of them relate to status. But where one could argue that the motivation of gain connects to gaining a status that the character did not previously enjoy, one can interpret the fourth tier as slightly connected to maintaining one’s status in the social hierarchy. One could describe the fourth tier of motivation to murder as one’s façade, because it relates to both maintaining one’s status and the status that others perceive in character to belong to. This status can be connected to self-preservation, even though the preservation of status can be read as shallower than the preservation of physical health. One can also interpret the preservation of the façade of the characters as a preservation of the image of self, and not necessarily the preservation of the character’s psyche. Since the motivation is the preservation of a façade, one can also advance the suggestion that the image can be perceived as false. Therefore, the motivation can contribute to exploration of the moral theme of hypocrisy.

The motivation of the crimes can deepen our understanding of the moral aspects in the novel, and also contribute to determining which moral issue can be seen as most prevalent. For example, the motivation of self-defense can not only expand the moral exploration of justice, but also introduce the moral element of forgiveness. One could argue that the

¹⁹² Christie, 2010:170-197

motivation of self-defense implies that there is a threat that the character is defending themselves against, and therefore the murder is partially justified. One could argue that the theme of forgiveness therefore explores whether murders can be forgiven. The motivation of gain can introduce the moral theme of greed, while exploring hypocrisy. The motivation of keeping the façade can further expand the moral theme of hypocrisy, while introducing the theme of hubris.

Justice and judgment in Cards on the table

Justice is a vast moral theme in *Cards on the table*, as in many crime fiction novels. The aim here will be to examine the moral idea of justice within *Cards on the table*, both in itself and in relation to other moral questions. One of the themes that can accompany justice is judgment. More specifically, the question that the moral theme of judgment can pose to the reader is the following: who has a right to judge crime? The judgment question becomes a part of the narrative because Shaitana wishes to judge those around him without realizing that he has no right to judge. On a metaphorical level, there are three different views of who is an appropriate judge in *Cards on the table*. The characters who are displayed with functions as judges sometimes appear as metaphors for the judgment of justice in the legal court system; sometimes, on a more general level, they pass judgments on moral values. As such, they represent a key element to the present enquiry, because they appear as moral arbiters, taking a stand on a moral issue. Thus, the implicit stands established by the elements of the action, such as those we have seen above, are completed by more explicit stands uttered by characters.

One could argue that the first character who appoints himself as judge, on a metaphorical level, is Shaitana. He is passing judgment, but does he actually have the right to do this? There could be two reasons, at least, why he does not possess the legal prerogatives of a proper judge. The first, obvious reason, is that he is a member of the public, with no affiliation or to or role in the legal system. The second reason, on a more general fictional level, is that he is clearly portrayed as a criminal himself, both because he can be perceived as homosexual, which, one needs to recall, is a crime, and because he can be seen as a blackmailer. That someone who is criminal wishes to pass judgments on others because they are more criminal than him can obviously be seen as an act of hubris. One other element of the hubris here consists in his attempt to stop people who are seen as a legitimate part of the upper middle-class, when he himself has reached his position in the upper middle class through blackmail. Also, from the viewpoint of the hierarchy of crimes, murderers would be

perceived as more dangerous than the blackmailer, and therefore Shaitana endangers himself when he attempts to arrest them and replace them in the social hierarchy. One could also advance the idea that, unlike Poirot, who is a former policeman, Shaitana does not follow the common protocol for pursuing criminals. However, the readers would not necessarily know whether or not he proceeds correctly. One sometimes has the impression that Shaitana is harassing people for his own entertainment instead of stopping criminals.

One could argue that the second person who appoints himself as judge is none other than Hercule Poirot himself. Poirot, of course, does not belong to the court system either, and his role is, in this sense, no less metaphorical than that of Shaitana. The key difference between him and Shaitana, however, is that Poirot, in the way he is depicted, appears much less biased. He does not judge others without evidence of their wrongdoing. He is also appointed to an investigative role in the narrative by virtue of being the main detective of *Cards on the table*. Nevertheless, Poirot frequently passes moral judgments and takes on the role of a judge in a more juridical sense – especially, of course, in last staged scene, which, as with so many of Christie’s final scenes, is loosely modeled on the theatrical aspects of a court procedure. Those sections appear as true court sessions even more strongly because an actual judgment in court is almost never part of the fictional narrative in Christie’s novel. The legal judgment is, on a narrative level, replaced by Poirot’s staged revelation of the criminal. One could argue that Poirot is neutral and objective, while Shaitana judges others because he is naturally condescending. Poirot first creates an image of the entire situation of the murder before he judges, while Shaitana seems to assume that someone is criminal based on partial evidence. Thus, the text presents Hercule Poirot as a just and sound authority, while Shaitana becomes the antagonistic character who wishes only to tarnish the reputation of others for his own entertainment.

The third judge in *Cards on the table* is the reader. One could perceive the reader as a judge here because he or she, as in any crime fiction, is to find a solution to the murder mystery. This role attributed to the reader shares elements traditionally belonging to the official investigator or judge in the police system or within courts. But the fact that the reader needs to find the solution could also imply that there is only one solution to the murder mystery. If, for example, the readers were to find major Despard guilty of the murders, the judgment would be invalid. Therefore, one could argue that *Cards on the table* advocates that those who judge others should represent a neutral and objective authority. Christie emphasizes that the judgment should be based on evidence and not assumptions, and by extension, that moral judgment should follow the same principals of impartiality.

The moral theme of judgment reads as a supplement to the moral theme of justice. Christie emphasizes the importance of a just judgment in which all important evidence is thoroughly examined. She exposes the hypocrisy inherent in a criminal being a judge and the hubris he commits when he tries to convict murderers. Therefore, judgment can be seen as a subtheme of the other moral themes, and not necessarily a moral theme in and of itself. As the judgments in *Cards on the table* are moral judgments that appear as legal judgments only in a metaphorical sense, Christie’s ideas of judging criminals extend, on a general level, to general principles concerning moral assessment, which should follow the same rigorous guidelines as the judging of criminal offenses.

Justice as a moral theme in Cards on the table

One of the major questions made in *Cards on the table* is that of the limits of justice. The question naturally extends to a dichotomy between genuine and a false justice, where false justice benefits only the upper middle class while genuine justice benefits all classes. The moral theme of justice can also raise the question of what one should do when injustices are uncovered.

It is especially the character of Shaitana in his eager search for what he himself perceives as justice that most effectively establishes the problems of the limits of justice. One can consider his relentless search for justice as hurtful to other characters, even though they are not necessarily hurt physically. When Shaitana threatens to hurt someone’s reputation so that he can ascend in the social hierarchy, this may instill fear in the other, even if the said character is guilty of a crime. The question that is raised here is that of whether it is right to traumatize a character psychologically just to stop them from committing more crimes.

Another problem that raises the issue of the limits of this hunt for justice is that of Anne Meredith. Could the strict adherence to justice on Shaitana’s part be something that actually triggered Anne Meredith’s mental condition? One could probably argue that injustice would seem like a more plausible cause of her mental illness, since she was raised in a poor family despite having a father in the military. Or one could advance the suggestion that she would still be mentally ill if she was rich, because of her rich habits. But one could perhaps also say that her mental illness was worsened by Shaitana’s schemes, if murderous attempts were a part of the diagnosis of kleptomania. But since one can interpret kleptomania as applying only to theft, this theory seems unlikely. Therefore, one could not say, except for the

trap set by Poirot¹⁹³, that Anne Meredith steals more after Shaitana’s death, than she has before.

However, the character of Shaitana raises a series of other questions concerning the limits of justice. Shaitana endangers others when he invites murderers for dinner. The notion of danger is increased by the fact that the readers lacks knowledge on whether those supposed guests are murders or not. One can therefore suggest that the reader’s first impression of Shaitana could be that he puts his own reputation and status above the safety of others. Thus, the text raises the question whether justice should have priority over safety. Another, similar question, is whether such proving of a character’s guilt have priority over protecting possible innocent people. This question is also strengthened by the fact that most of the characters do not have the option of protecting themselves from Shaitana’s allegations, since he avoids disclosing them to the suspects.

Shaitana can also be said to endanger himself when he provokes murderers, and therefore one can ask whether Shaitana sacrifices his own safety over the status and attention he could get if he stops a murderer in a murderous attempt. One might suggest that Shaitana is so dedicated to his own social status that he is willing to risk his own life to protect it.

Another question is also whether Shaitana’s blackmail actually stops murders. The murderers are being threatened after they have committed the crimes. Shaitana does not seem to have any leads as to whether these murderers are planning other crimes. One could argue that Shaitana has chosen a peculiar time to expose murderers when he does not know if they will murder again. But one can also argue that these murderers would commit new crimes again because it is in their nature regardless of his actions.

Several murders take place after Shaitana’s death. But is the increase in murder numbers caused by Shaitana’s provocations? even if one is only counting the murders that were committed before Shaitana was killed there were still committed five murders before his murder, while after his death there was one murder, one murderous attempt and a death that could be ruled as either an accident or a suicide. Even though Shsitana did provoke crime, less crime occurred than before he interfered.

In sum the exploration of justice in *Cards on the Table* indicates the conflicts that occurs are not provoked by justice that has overreached its limits. Those conflicts are due to two other factors. The first is injustice. It is injustice that has caused Anne Meredith’s mental condition and Mrs. Lorrimer’s experience of plausible domestic violence. The second factor is

¹⁹³ Christie, 2010:410-419

justice for the wrong causes for example justice that is focused on one’s own gain over the greater good. More than providing answers as to the limits of justice, *Cards on the Table* raises a number of questions. The novel turns into an examination of the idea of justice itself, mainly centering on the crucial character of Shaitana. However, this enquiry leaves more questions than it replies to. What is at stake is the very idea of justice itself, and what is underscored is perhaps that justice, after all, is a matter of great complexity. If there is a lesson to be drawn from the various ideas on justice emerging from the actions of Shaitana, it is perhaps that justice obtained with criminal and egotistical means is a condemnable thing.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness can be seen as a moral theme, especially in Anne Meredith’s and Mrs. Lorrimer’s arcs. Forgiveness necessarily involves past actions. Therefore, the idea of forgiveness is particularly closely connected with narrative. In *Cards of the Table* one sees that the narrative is constructed by the sins of the past because most of the murders in the narrative occur in the past. One needs to examine the plot in order to comment upon forgiveness. .

In Mrs. Lorrimer’s case one sees that she still feels guilt and shame for her husband’s murder, even though it was most likely committed in self-defense. One could say that lack of forgiveness weakens her quality of life because she still struggles with the shame of the murder. Another aspect of the lack of forgiveness related to Mrs. Lorrimer is her avoidance to talk about her husband. The fact that she murdered him in self-defense is the only aspect of their life together that she has held on to and not been able to forgive herself for. Therefore, one could argue that one moral aspect concerning forgiveness, and linked to her character arc, consist in forgiving criminals when they do not commit crime again, on the condition that they commit crime to save themselves or others.

The notion of this moral stand may be strengthened by the character arc of major Despard who has also murdered professor Luxmore in self-defense. One might suggest that major Despard is metaphorically forgiven by being one of two suspects that survive. Another aspect of major Despard’s character arc that can strengthen the moral lesson is that those who save others, even by criminal means are forgiven. This occurs, for instance, when he faces a second chance to love via saving Rhoda Dawes from drowning. The first time major Despard attempted a romantic relationship with a woman he saved, she was a widow who did not wish to move on.

Anne Meredith is on the other hand not forgiven. The reason she committed crimes was not to save herself, but rather because she lacked self-control. She also hurt women that

were weaker than her. Thus, the moral lesson could be that one is not entitled to forgiveness if one takes advantage of others. The lack of forgiveness can be displayed in the fact that Anne Meredith commits suicide, which means that Poirot cannot give her justice by solving her murder case.

One could suggest that the lack of forgiveness in Anne Meredith’s case may relate to the lack of change in her character. Even though she knows that it is wrong, Anne Meredith still commits theft. One could argue that the reason for the murderous attempt on Rhoda Dawes is that she, in committing the murder can continue to steal. Therefore, one could also argue that she really does lack the will to change.

As a moral theme then, forgiveness is examined from several angles. The three characters that have forgiveness as part of their character arcs have three different approaches on how to deal with forgiveness. One could advance that Mrs. Lorrimer tries to hide what happened in order to move on. Anne Meredith, one could argue, pretends that what she is doing is not wrong. It simply is a lifestyle that contributes to her keeping her status and façade. Major Despard tries to forgive himself and start over again to become a better person. He is rewarded with a loving relationship. With *Cards on the Table* Christie poses forgiveness as a major moral theme, implicitly suggesting that one can forgive the sins of the past if one tries to improve of one’s mistakes. In sum, even though leaving the catholic realm of earlier British crime fiction, this is a stand that clearly relates to Christian tradition.

Hypocrisy and hubris

Hubris is perhaps one of the key moral themes in *Cards on the Table*, on that links many of the other issues, and one that encompasses almost all the victimized characters. One other large area, that of hypocrisy, is present in two different characters that fulfill two different roles or functions in the crime fiction narrative, both Dr. Roberts who is the murderer in *Cards on the Table*¹⁹⁴ and Shaitana that is the first victim of the narrative.¹⁹⁵ How does this hypocrisy act differently and how does the narrative deal with this hypocrisy? these are questions raised by the text.

As previously suggested, Shaitana seems to be heavily marked by hubris. He can be seen as a criminal because he is a blackmailer, but he wants others to perceive him as a law-abiding citizen. One could emphasize that there is a difference between being a law-abiding citizen and being perceived as one. Howeverm Shaitana does not seem to put much effort into

¹⁹⁴ Christie, 2010:565-582

¹⁹⁵ Christie, 2010:53-57

being a law-abiding citizen. One can further hypothesize that being perceived as a law-abiding citizen in the public eye can allow Shaitana to further tarnish the reputation of others. Shaitana appears as a character who does not necessarily want to be a law-abiding citizen because it is the right choice but because it allows him to continue to be a criminal blackmailer just more hidden and against people that will not necessarily be defended by others once they are revealed.

Does Shaitana’s blackmail and threats create more law-abiding citizens because they fear that he will reveal their criminal secrets? This theory may seem unlikely because Dr. Roberts, who has committed the most murders is not outwardly afraid of Shaitana. One could suggest that the lack of fear could be due to the fact that Shaitana does not seem to have any evidence. But one could further argue that Dr. Roberts is not afraid or ashamed of being a criminal. He is more afraid of not being in his preferred occupation, which can be seen when he murders Mr. Craddock because he threatens to remove the medical license of Dr. Roberts.

Dr. Roberts can be read as a doctor who enjoys his work and he is viewed in a positive light by most of his patients¹⁹⁶. The only patient that does openly complain about Dr. Roberts is Mrs. Graves, who is rarely taken seriously by medical officials and often changes doctors after presumably false accusations.¹⁹⁷ Dr. Roberts is also portrayed as sympathetic and humoristic¹⁹⁸.

But the fact that Dr. Roberts cheated on one of his patients with the patient’s wife creates an image of Dr. Roberts as a hypocrite. This adultery is not illegal, but it certainly is presented as immoral, and it is also according to the narrative a reason for Dr. Robert’s medical license to be revoked. One could argue that the moral theme of hypocrisy is introduced in the scene where the adultery is discovered because Dr. Roberts has been presented as a chipper doctor up until this scene in the narrative. When it is discovered that he has taken advantage of one of his patients is perceived as hypocritical.

Dr. Roberts dismissal of the worth of others can be seen especially in the cases of Mrs. Graves and Mrs. Craddock. Mrs. Graves was a woman who D. Roberts dismissed the complaints of before he sent her to another doctor. But Mrs. Craddock can be seen as the most egregious because when she wishes to leave her husband and start a relationship with Dr. Roberts, murders her instead because one might suggest that he does not want to keep someone alive who has evidence that he did take advantage of her.

¹⁹⁶ Christie, 2010:26-27

¹⁹⁷ Christie, 2010:157-177

¹⁹⁸ Christie, 2010:26-40

Dr. Roberts have lost seven patients and there is proof that he has murdered two of them. There is no doubt Dr. Roberts can be read as a hypocritical doctor. He murders patients instead of saving them. There is also uncertainty on whether the other five patients died of natural causes or not, thus a reader could speculate on whether he has murdered all seven patients or not.

One could argue that Dr. Roberts commits hubris when he murders his patients. He believes that the medical board will not expose his murders. But the moral theme of hubris can also be seen as enhanced when he murders Shaitana while Hercule Poirot is in the same room and Mrs. Lorrimer while Poirot is close by. One kind of hubris can be rebelling against authorities without the proper means, but this could also reveal one’s more realistic and criminal self. Dr. Roberts is revealed as the murderer at the end of the narrative, therefore one could argue that his hubris can contribute to revealing his hypocrisy. One could further advance that when his hypocrisy is revealed, he takes on a rather different personality. One recognizes a slight psychopathology in the personality he transforms into. In the end scene of *Cards on the Table* Dr. Roberts transforms from a renowned village doctor to a murderous character displaying narcissistic traits.

On the other hand, Shaitana commits hubris in the beginning of the narrative. In the dinner party scene, Shaitana seeks to have the murderer arrested, He commits hubris when he provokes them during dinner. He certainly does not have the proper evidence to back his claims. When the scene of hubris comes so early in the narrative the reader get an impression of Shaitana as a somewhat less trustworthy character than Hercule Poirot. Also, when the moment of hubris arrives so early in the narrative, Shaitana’s murder becomes even more tragic. Instead of being just an untrustworthy criminal, Shaitana becomes a rebel who fought for what he believed in, but with the inappropriate means.

In many ways the narrative poses the question of who is worse, Shaitana who blackmails others to gain a higher status or Dr. Roberts who murders four characters? On one hand, as Kristeva argues, murder is abject in itself because it confronts the boundaries between life and death and between good and evil¹⁹⁹. In such a perspective, Dr. Roberts choice of murdering others becomes inherently terrifying. His character corresponds to what Kristeva calls the ambiguous when he does not feel guilty about taking advantage of and murdering others. But Shaitana has also blackmailed several people to the extent that almost every character in his social circle fears him. He also does not regret his actions and believes

¹⁹⁹ Kristeva, 1982:13-50

that he is correct in blackmailing these people because he believes that they are criminals. Whereas in Dr. Roberts case there is a clear number of characters that he could have murdered, the narrative does not necessarily reveal how many characters that Shaitana considers part of his collection.

In sum hypocrisy can be read as the main moral theme in *Cards on the Table* while hubris rather becomes a subtheme to that main thematic element. Hypocrisy is clearly more visible than hubris and can be easier to detect. One could argue that hypocrisy as a moral theme emphasizes the idea of looking behind the façade that the characters put up in order to see the criminal actions that they have committed. In doing so, one can pose the question of how important façade should really be. Hubris on the other hand poses the question of how much a character can possibly achieve,. Another important question that the narrative poses is whether crime should be rated, and which crime is actually worse, one which causes physical harm or one which causes psychological harm. As we have seen in this chapter, Christie explores a series of moral issues, several of which are addressed as the narrative unfolds. More than entering a very large number of thematic areas, *Cards on the Table* develops stands on a selected number of moral problems, often providing careful answers that enables to draw the outline of a general moral thought around questions such as justice and hypocrisies, but also taking into account contemporary examples and problems, such as domestic violence. Thus, the moral impact of Christie’s, given the huge popularity of her works throughout the world decades, should not be underestimated.

Conclusion

Cawelti argues that even though crime fiction can be seen as an escapist entertainment genre, the genre can also be read as a moral fantasy where justice prevails²⁰⁰. But is justice the only moral theme in *Cards on the Table*? And how does the narrative of *Cards on the Table* morally portray characters that have committed crimes and are victims during the narrative?

This thesis argues that four main moral themes can be identified in *Cards on the table*. The first is justice. One could see justice as an overarching moral theme that may affect all the characters. In *Cards on the Table* justice creates a moral dichotomy between justice and injustice. The subtheme of injustice can be seen as particularly prominent in the character arcs of Anne Meredith and Mrs. Lorrimer. The second moral theme can be identified as hypocrisy. Hypocrisy is especially connected to Shaitana because it relates to him building a façade while being a different character, but it also connects to Anne Meredith who wishes to be seen as a kind of poor assistant but who actually is a mentally ill criminal. The third moral theme is hubris. The fourth moral theme is forgiveness and especially connects to Mrs. Lorrimer, where the arc asks the question of whether crime can be forgiven.

The three victims in *Cards on the Table* can all be counted as criminals, but most of them are mostly portrayed in a sympathetic light. When they are revealed as criminals, most of them appear as less sympathetic. The only exception to this loss in sympathy is arguably Mrs. Lorrimer. Mrs. Lorrimer becomes more sympathetic after she is revealed as criminal, but she also becomes more tragic, because she is both implied to be a victim of domestic violence and it is revealed that she is dying²⁰¹. All three victims are also punished for their crimes indirectly through their murders. The only criminal character who does not die is major Despard who murdered professor Luxmore to save his wife from assault²⁰².

Research results compared to earlier research

The moral aspects of *Cards on the Table* show some interesting connections to more modern crime fiction, and especially to one of the most prominent fields of crime fiction today, Nordic noir. Silje Flesvik, who studied criminal characters in crime fiction novels by Unni Lindell,²⁰³ found a clear difference between male and female criminal characters. Whereas male characters often were openly criminal, female characters often hid their criminal

²⁰⁰ Cawelti, 1977:22-24

²⁰¹ Christie, 2010:480-498

²⁰² Christie, 2010:363-364

²⁰³ Flesvik, 2011

tendencies. Flesvik also found a probable correlation between female criminal characters and mental illness. The mental illness in Lindell’s novels was often caused by physical or sexual abuse according to Flesvik²⁰⁴.

One could argue that there are similar tendencies in *Cards on the table*. The male victim, Shaitana is openly threatening and dangerous in the beginning of the narrative²⁰⁵. The threatening nature of Shaitana reduces the surprising effect when Shaitana is revealed as blackmailer later in the narrative²⁰⁶. Even though Shaitana is not openly criminal, the readers may suspect that he is somewhat criminal early on in the narrative. He cannot be said to be hiding his threatening ideas but displays them quite early.

The female victims in *Cards on the Table* are often hiding their true criminal natures, but they are not necessarily purely criminal. Anne Meredith’s backstory also contains mental illness, also in this sense she is a victim²⁰⁷. But unlike the results of Flesvik’s study her mental illness is not caused by abuse. Mrs. Lorrimer’s background implies that she has been a victim of physical violence. However, this may simply detail why she murdered her husband²⁰⁸. It does not necessarily dictate that Mrs. Lorrimer should stay a criminal. Mrs. Lorrimer is also one of the few victims that can be seen as a functioning member of society.

Perspectivization

The thesis is certainly limited by the scope of a master’s thesis work. Most particularly, it only encompassed one novel by Agatha Christie. However, more profound studies would probably reveal relevance to other works by Christie. Another limitation is the restriction on one kind of crime fiction, the whodunit. It would be interesting to discuss whether the same moral implications could be found in, let say, hard boiled crime fiction or in other kinds of crime novels. How would ambiguous victims and the moral implications of their actions appear as a phenomenon in other subgenres?

Fairly little scholarly interest has been shown in the topic of crime fiction. Most of the research focuses on general themes, or the genre itself. When specific phenomena relevant to this thesis, such as ambiguous characters or character types, like the femme fatale, have been studied, these phenomena have been researched in film noir mostly. Homosexuality in crime fiction is even less studied.

²⁰⁴ Flesvik, 2011

²⁰⁵ Christie, 2010:5-19

²⁰⁶ Christie, 2010:300

²⁰⁷ Christie, 2010:336-462

²⁰⁸ Christie, 2010:480-498

Even though the whodunit may seem as a strictly escapist entertainment genre, it appears as a highly moral genre which implies specific moral themes. The genre also punishes criminal characters via murder. Therefore, in *Cards on the Table*, when the victims are proven to have committed crime they inevitably have to be punished for it to keep the moral fantasy. The moral themes do not come up as an explicit lesson, but are implied through the characters actions and their consequences. The ambiguous victims in *Cards on the Table* almost become two different characters, one mostly sympathetic before their reveal as criminals, and one antagonistic and tragic after this is revealed.

Further research

There are several aspects of crime fiction that opens up of further research in this area. Especially the whodunit genre has undergone little investigation, even for such basic elements as its general evolution over time. One could for example compare works such as *The Burning Court*, *Death on the Nile* and *The Nine Tailors* by the authors John Dickson Carr²⁰⁹, Agatha Christie²¹⁰ and Dorothy Sayers²¹¹. It would be highly interesting to study those works in light of the positions of scholars such as Malmgren²¹², Porter²¹³ and Somerset Maugham²¹⁴.

There is also the whole issue of film adaptation. A famous adaption of *Cards on the Table* was created in 2005 by Sarah Harding, featuring David Suchet as Hercule Poirot, Alexander Siddig as Shaitana, Lyndsey Marshal as Anne Meredith and Lesley Manville as Mrs. Lorrimer²¹⁵. Especially interesting in this adaptation are the interpretations of Shaitana and Dr Roberts and how their characters changes from novel to film, especially when it comes to the different portrayals of homosexuality. Homosexuality is rarely depicted in crime fiction and it would be interesting to carry out a comparative analysis of for instance the novel *Fadeout* by Joseph Hansen²¹⁶ and *The talented Mr. Ripley* by Patricia Highsmith²¹⁷ to compare how the homosexual characters in these novels are portrayed, especially with reference to the ideas put forward in Gill Plain’s *Twentieth Century Crime Fiction, Gender*

²⁰⁹ Dickson Carr, 2011

²¹⁰ Christie, 2010

²¹¹ Sayers, 2016

²¹² Malmgren, 2001

²¹³ Porter, 1995

²¹⁴ Somerset, Maugham, 1995

²¹⁵ Harding, 2005

²¹⁶ Hansen, 2015

²¹⁷ Highsmith, 2011

*Sex and the Body*²¹⁸ and by Butler²¹⁹, to analyze different portrayals of the homosexual characters.

Another interesting analysis would be a comparative analysis of the detective characters from three different subgenres of crime fiction, the police procedural, the whodunit and the hard-boiled crime story to compare how the detectives are depicted in the different genres. One example of characters that may be compared is Sherlock Holmes, Hercule Poirot and Sam Spade in the novels *a Study in Scarlet*²²⁰, *Cards on the Table*²²¹ and *The Maltese falcon*²²². In sum, this works opens up more venues than it closes, and as such, it ends in the opposite way of most crime fictions stories.

²¹⁸ Plain, 2014

²¹⁹ Butler 1990

²²⁰ Conan Doyle, 2008

²²¹ Christie, 2010

²²² Hammett, 1972

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