



بسم الله الرحمن الرحيم

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Agatha Christie's Detective Novels

By
Abeer Abdel-Razzak Ibrahim

Ph. D. Dissertation

Under the supervision of
Professor/ Mary M. F. Massoud

Faculty of Arts
Ain-Shams University
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Preface

Agatha Christie brought into full bloom a genre which started with Edgar Allan Poe, and had its seeds in Godwin's *Caleb Williams* and Dickens' *Bleak House* among other writers. Her art was as highly appreciated in her lifetime, as it is today. As Patricia Maida and Richard Spornick tell us in their book, *Murder She Wrote*,

She is the second most printed author in English-- next to Shakespeare. According to a 1962 UNESCO Report, her works have been translated into 103 languages (at least a dozen more than the works of Shakespeare .. She is acknowledged by the UNESCO to be the most widely read British author in the world.. In the 1960s her total sales was placed at an excess of 350 million while in 1975 it was said to be probably more than 400 million copies. (p. 1).

A small tour through bookshops on the internet, such as Barnes and Noble, John Smith and Son, and Amazon, will show us that her books are available in print and ready to ship within 24 hours, while the books of her contemporaries are mostly out of print and out of order, and can only be obtained through special orders. As every encyclopedia will tell us, in 1950 Agatha Christie was made a Fellow of the Royal Society in Literature. She was awarded the Grand Masters Award of the Mystery Writers of America in 1954,

and was elected president of the Detection Club of England in 1957. In 1961, she received an honorary Doctorate from Exeter University. In 1956, she was given the title: Commander of the British Empire by Queen Elizabeth II, and the title was elevated to Dame Commander of the British Empire in 1971. She also has her literary imitators, as we shall see in chapters IV and V. The question which this study will attempt to answer is this: what is the secret of Agatha Christie's popularity? Is it related to her art as a novelist, or to other external factors?

Of her 184 detective works, this dissertation will concentrate only on 45 novels: 33 where Hercule Poirot is the main detective, and 12 where Miss Marple is the sleuth. These novels are regarded as her best works. They feature her most popular sleuths, tracing her career from the first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) with Poirot as protagonist, to her last novel, *Sleeping Murder* (1976) where Miss Marple is the sleuth.

This dissertation consists of six chapters and a conclusion. The first chapter deals with the main ingredients of the detective novel, highlighting the differences between two genres which are often confused, namely: the detective novel and the crime novel; and it shows that Agatha Christie's works belong to the first.

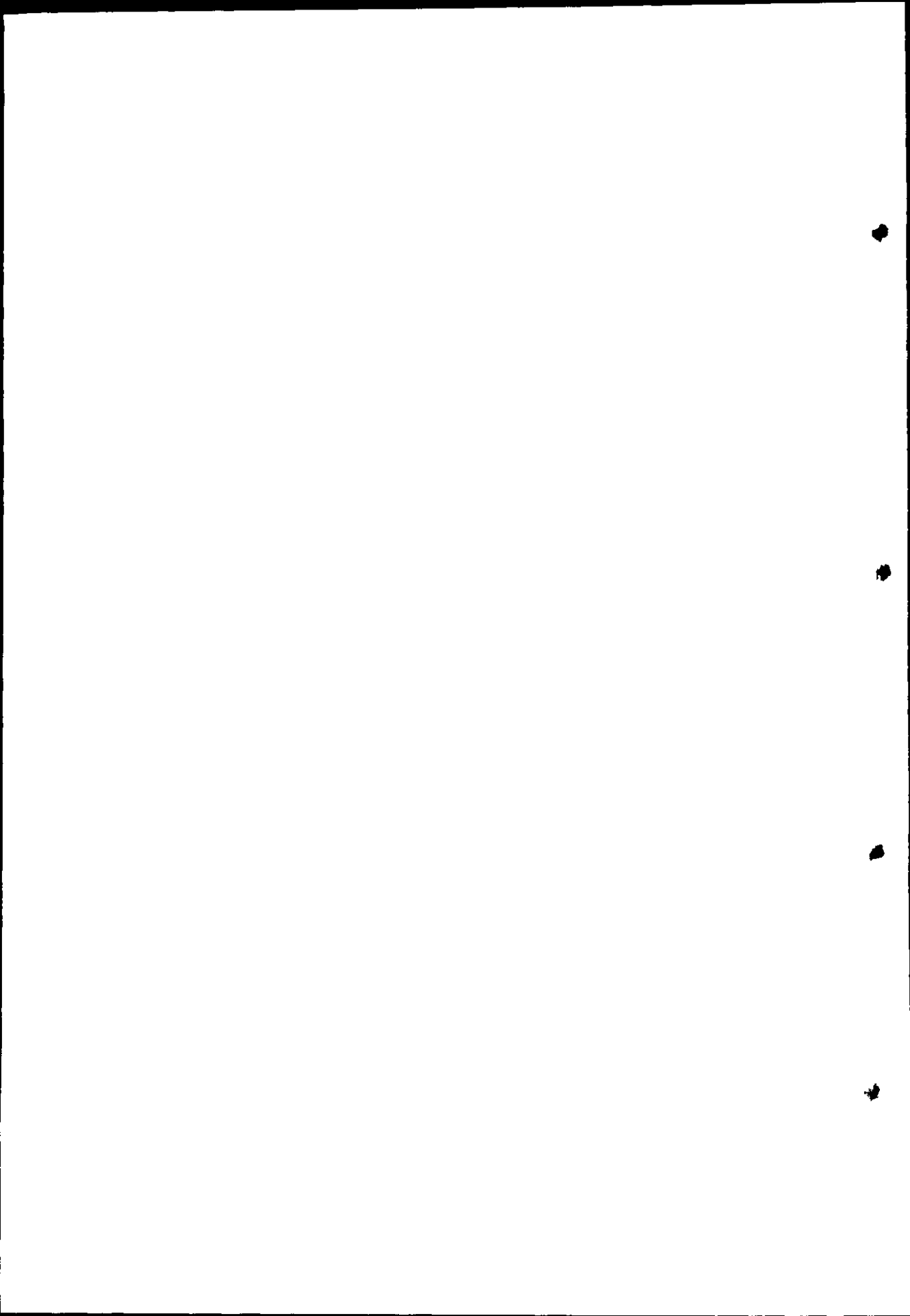
The second chapter traces the development of detective fiction from its beginning with Edgar Allan Poe's tales till it reaches its culmination in Agatha Christie's works, showing the difference in social orientation between writers who write the detective novel as a puzzle game and those who

write the detective novel with social implications in mind.

The third chapter deals with thematic aspects of Agatha Christie's novels, showing the causes in which Agatha Christie was interested. Through that, it tries to convey a mind-image of Agatha Christie as a human being: what she was like, and what attracted her attention.

The fourth chapter concentrates upon the character and methods of Poirot, while the fifth deals with the character and methods of Miss Marple.

The sixth chapter considers the technical aspects of Agatha Christie's works. Finally, the conclusion tries to arrive at the main reasons for the tremendous popularity of Agatha Christie's novels, and to answer the question why she in particular, and not any other novelist of the same era and orientation, achieved that great popularity.



Chapter I
The Detective Novel and
The Crime Novel

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The Detective Novel and The Crime Novel

The detective novel, in which Agatha Christie excelled, is vastly different from the crime novel, although in some minor details the two may be similar. We cannot arrive at a proper evaluation of Agatha Christie's novels without first having a clear picture of these two kinds of novel, which are so often confused.

In the detective novel, a crime is committed and a problem solver is introduced in order to discover the real culprit, or the person who has committed the crime, and this gives the traditional detective novel its descriptive name: "whodunit". As a novel, the traditional detective novel, the whodunit, usually has the five major ingredients of any novel: setting, plot, characters, theme, and technique. We shall deal with each of these in detail when we discuss the characteristic features of Agatha Christie's novels. However in this chapter we shall consider only those features differentiating the detective novel from the crime novel.

Most detective novels in the period before World War I in England and the United States, and between the two World Wars in England were set in the country house. The country house is a special phenomenon, since it was the abode of large families who belonged to the landed aristocracy

who did not have to work in order to earn their living. These people usually serve as suspects in detective novels. The library is the favourite place for the corpse to be discovered, and also for the victim to be killed, since the country house is usually teeming with relatives and servants, and one needs quietness when one works in the library, and therefore, the killer is not likely to be interrupted during the act.

The plot always occupies the first place in any detective novel. To the writer of the detective novel, the puzzle game has priority over building plausible characters. Yet, the success of the detective novelist lies in his ability to flesh his characters to be more substantial than what is called "stock puppets". Literary critics have agreed, almost unanimously, on what Basil Hogarth in his book, *Writing Thrillers for Profit*, has expressed in a few words by saying: "The great 'snag' of the detective novel resides undoubtedly in the characterization" (p. 65). The detective novel does not devote too much space to character. The character is sufficiently fleshed up to sustain some of the reader's interest, though most of the concentration of the novel is on the plot. If we take Christie's *Lord Edgware Dies* as an example (and it is not a specially peopled novel, but about average as for the number of characters), we will find that the main characters are Lord Edgware, the main victim, his wife, the killer, his daughter, nephew, butler, and secretary, in addition to the second victim (Carlotta Adams) and a few secondary characters. All in all, the number of characters is