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NON-EVIL MURDER?

A study of different moral judgements in Agatha Christie's *Appointment with Death* and *Evil under the Sun*.

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ABSTRACT

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Denna uppsats utforskar konceptet ondskefullt agerande i två Agatha Christie-romaner med detektiven Hercule Poirot, *Appointment with Death* (1938) och *Evil under the Sun* (1941) (svenska titlar *Döden till mötes* respektive *Mord på ljusa dagen*). Dessa romaner skiljer sig i hur det centrala mordet uppfattas; mordet på Mrs Boynton i *Appointment with Death* ter sig vara en moraliskt felaktig handling, men inte ond, medan mordet på Arlena Marshall i *Evil under the Sun* är en ondskefull handling. Genom en litterär jämförelse av romanerna identifieras några aspekter som bidrar till de olika moraliska bedömningarna. Morden skiljer sig åt vad gäller offrets karaktär samt mördarens motivationer, avsikter, och hur denne själv påverkas av sin handling. Aspekterna diskuteras sedan utifrån några moderna filosofiska teorier om ondska, och då främst ondskefulla handlingar. Att bedöma en handling som ondskefull visar sig vara en uppgift av noggrant avvägande. Dessutom visar det sig vara svårt att skilja på ondskefulla handlingar och ondskefulla personer i mina studerade romaner, något som kan studeras vidare.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

<i>I. INTRODUCTION</i>	4
<i>I. 1. Objective</i>	4
<i>I. 2. Research background and scope of this essay</i>	5
<i>II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND</i>	7
<i>II. 1. Theories of evil</i>	7
II. 1. 1. Formosa's combination theory of evil acts	8
II. 1. 2. Calder's qualitative distinction of evil action from wrongdoing	9
II. 1. 3. Evil personhood – a philosophical concept	10
<i>II. 2. The relationship of detective stories to morality and evil</i>	12
<i>II. 3. Internal scale of wrongful to evil action in the works of Agatha Christie</i>	13
II. 3. 1. Hercule Poirot's moral compass	14
<i>III. COMPARISON OF APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH AND EVIL UNDER THE SUN</i>	16
<i>III. 1. Setting – savagery and sacrifice</i>	17
<i>III. 2. The character of the murder victim</i>	20
<i>III. 3. Confrontation with the murderer</i>	22
<i>IV. EVIL OR VERY WRONG?</i>	25
<i>IV. 1. Psychologically thick evil</i>	25
<i>IV. 2. Evil personhood</i>	28
<i>V. CONCLUSION</i>	29
<i>WORKS CITED</i>	30

I. INTRODUCTION

The study of evil is ever interesting and, unfortunately, never obsolete. Particularly after the second World War, when the atrocities of the Holocaust entered public consciousness, the concept of evil resurfaced as a pressing matter. That is to say evil in the narrow, moral sense, whereby evil is something a moral agent does or causes.¹ It is a flourishing area of study, from the metaphysics of what evil is (if indeed evil exists), to psychology attempting to find distinguishing hallmarks of an evil brain, to the social-psychology of what drives otherwise ordinary people to commit acts of evil.² A brief overview of the modern discussion of evil, pertaining to this essay's research question, is outlined in chapter II.

When thinking of literature which discusses the nature of evil, the mind leaps to Shakespearean villains and the characters of Dostoevsky. There is, however, a modern popular genre that is fundamentally concerned with evil: detective fiction. Agatha Christie (1890–1976) is perhaps the most well-known author of detective fiction ever. Her works rival only the Bible in sales, distribution and translation.

Christie's two most famous detective characters are Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. For this study, I have chosen Poirot novels as a focus. Poirot is a Belgian former police detective turned private investigator. The concept of evil is important to Poirot: for him evil is both very real, something more than "a lack of goodness", and ubiquitous.

I. 1. Objective

In this essay I will attempt to illustrate some aspects of what differentiates wrongful action from evil action by way of two examples from detective fiction: Agatha Christie's *Appointment with Death* (1938) and *Evil under the Sun* (1941). A lot of research on the concept of evil has traditionally been, and still is, done by comparing evil with good.³ Still more work is done by

¹ Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil" in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (summer 2020 edition), Edward N. Zalta (ed.), forthcoming URL <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2020/entries/concept-evil/> [accessed 21/05/2020].

² NPR Staff, "On the Scale of Evil, Where do Murderers Rate?", *npr.org* 21/08/2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129175964&t=1585663349106> [accessed 05/04/2020]; Philip Zimbardo, "The psychology of evil", TEDTalk, 2008, https://www.ted.com/talks/philip_zimbardo_the_psychology_of_evil/details?language=en, [accessed 08/05/2020].

³ Todd Calder, "Evil and Its Opposite", *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 49, 2015, pp. 113–130.

investigating large scale atrocities, "paradigm evils".⁴ I think an investigation of the murky divide where the 'very wrong' becomes 'evil' is just as pertinent – and for this purpose, detective fiction contains some excellent material. Christie's works, and detective stories in general, still get a bad rap and "there is still a lingering sense that it is somehow uncomplicated literature that does not require detailed critical analysis and interpretation."⁵ Rolls and Gulddal call for a "reappropriation" of Agatha Christie by studying her works as *text* first and foremost, leaving biographical and historical details as context. I hope that this essay may be a small contribution to such critical study.

The questions to be answered are: what literary aspects of the novels *Appointment with Death* compared to *Evil under the Sun* contribute to the apparent moral judgement of the murder in *Appointment* being merely wrongful, while the murder in *Evil* is evil? How does this distinction between wrongful and evil action fit into the modern philosophical framework of evil action?

I. 2. Research background and scope of this essay

The genre of detective stories has been subject to literary research almost since it first appeared. Bo Bennich-Björkman details some of the more important developments of academic research into the genre.⁶ Bennich-Björkman shows that the focus of research for a long period lay in identifying the peculiarities of the detective story, thus determining the genre and finding its roots in literary history. Placing the detective genre in socio-historic and history of ideas frameworks is one of the main strands of research Bennich-Björkman identifies.⁷

The works of Agatha Christie have since enjoyed an increase in interest for themselves, particularly in the last two decades. The field is now so wide that it is impossible to here give a full account of all developments. Christie's detective fiction has spawned academic research on everything from the attitudes to doctors in her novels, the orientalism and imperialism expressed in them, the poisons characters are murdered with, and a multitude of studies on aspects of gender connected to her writing.

⁴ Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2002), DOI:10.1093/0195145089.001.0001.

⁵ Alistair Rolls & Jesper Gulddal, "Reappropriating Agatha Christie: An Introduction", *Clues*, vol. 34, iss. 1, 2016, p. 8.

⁶ Bo Bennich-Björkman, *Forskning om detektivromanen 1907–77: en kritisk granskning av viktigare insatser i England, USA, Frankrike och Tyskland* (Tidskriften Jury, 1979).

⁷ Bo Bennich-Björkman, *Forskning om detektivromanen 1907–77*, p. 138.

Evil in the broad sense, synonymous with all things bad, has of course been put to philosophical thought prior to World War II. A lot of this was devoted to reconciling the many evils present in life with an omnipotent, benevolent God.⁸ The first secular account of evil was proffered by Immanuel Kant, who remains influential for moral theory in general and for many modern accounts of evil. Investigation into the concept of evil in the narrow sense began with Hannah Arendt's works exploring totalitarianism and the Holocaust.⁹ Her work *Eichmann in Jerusalem* gives an account of how evil can be perpetrated from very ordinary and banal motives.¹⁰ Arendt's account of banal evil in turn spurred Zimbardo, among others, to search for social-psychological conditions which promote otherwise ordinary people to commit evil acts.¹¹

Some theorists, evil-skeptics, think the term evil to be obsolete and even dangerous in a modern secular environment. Others, evil-revivalists, argue that evil is an important concept in moral discourse to properly capture the significance of large-scale and horrific wrongs.¹² Evil might have a religious or supernatural ring to it, but I will be approaching evil from a secular perspective, in accordance with many modern theorists. Agatha Christie was herself a practicing Christian, nevertheless, the evil in her detective stories has totally human sources and agents.¹³

The boundaries of this study are by necessity narrow. A thankful aspect of using Christie's detective fiction as a starting point for an investigation into evil is the exclusion of genocides, mass killings, institutionalized torture, and other all-too-real atrocities. Studying genocides and other human atrocities has been suggested as a starting point for a concept of evil, for example by Claudia Card in *The Atrocity Paradigm*.¹⁴ A formal detective novel of the interwar period does not in general contain torture, rape, or mass-murder. As previously stated, much research has already been conducted on Christie's orientalism, and her sometimes racist and anti-Semitic remarks and characterisations, so I will not address these aspects in my commentary on the Middle Eastern setting of *Appointment*.

⁸ Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil" in *SEP*, section 2.

⁹ Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil" in *SEP*, section 2.

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem: A Report on the Banality of Evil* (London: Faber and Faber, 1963).

¹¹ Philip Zimbardo, "The psychology of evil", TEDTalk.

¹² Todd Calder, "The Concept of Evil" in *SEP*, section 1.

¹³ Laura Thompson, *Agatha Christie: ett engelskt mysterium [Agatha Christie – an English mystery, 2007]*, trans. Ulla Trenter (Deckarförlaget Pussel, 2009).

¹⁴ Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm: A Theory of Evil* (Oxford University Press, 2003), DOI:10.1093/0195145089.001.0001.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

In this chapter I sketch some of the philosophical ideas of today on evil action, and how to distinguish evil from very wrong. I also give a brief account of the philosophical discussion of evil personhood. Further, I outline the relationship between detective fiction and moral discourse, then introduce a moral ranking of actions (murders) prevalent in Agatha Christie's oeuvre.

II. 1. Theories of evil

An important intuition about moral evil, shared by philosophers and laypeople alike, is that evil is something above and beyond 'normal' wrongdoing. Further, various theories of evil adopt "psychologically thick concepts" of evil and "psychologically thin" ones.¹⁵ A psychologically thick concept of evil action is one that attributes a specific set of motives, intentions, and/or other psychological states, to the agent. The concept of a compassionate act is a psychologically thick concept, since it implies the belief, on the agent's side, of the suffering of another and a wish or an intention to remove that object from their suffering.¹⁶ We would not call an act compassionate if it was motivated by self-interest on the agent's side. The act could, however, still be called good. Russell describes the concepts of good and bad as examples of psychologically thin concepts. These concepts do not contain within them information about any specific psychological states behind the action.¹⁷

Psychologically thin concepts of evil action, then, posit that acts of evil may arise from a great variety of motives. Hannah Arendt's *Eichmann in Jerusalem* is a massively influential psychologically thin concept of evil. In that work, Arendt explores the case of Adolf Eichmann (one of the main architects of the "Final Solution"), attempting to combine the atrocities he administrated with his "terrifyingly normal" presentation at trial. The concept of "banal evil" arose from the observation that Eichmann organized and oversaw the Holocaust not from any demonic or monstrous motives, but out of extremely ordinary concerns such as career advancement and thoughtlessness.¹⁸

¹⁵Luke Russell, *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation* (Oxford University Press, 2014) chs. 4–6.

¹⁶ Luke Russell, *Evil: A Philosophical Investigation*, p. 75.

¹⁷ Luke Russell, *Evil*, p. 75.

¹⁸ Hannah Arendt, *Eichmann in Jerusalem*.

Paul Formosa lists four approaches used "to conceive of evil acts".¹⁹ There is the victim approach, a version of which is defended by Card, that argues that it is something about the nature and extent of the harm inflicted on a victim that defines evil action.²⁰ There is the perpetrator approach, which takes the view that something specific about the perpetrator separates evil action from merely wrong. Eve Garrard, for example, suggests a mechanism of metaphysical silencing on the part of the perpetrator, that delineates evil action from the very wrong.²¹ There is the bystander approach which takes the reactions of bystanders to an evil action – like disgust, horror, or incomprehensibility – as key for pinpointing evil rather than wrongful action. Finally, there is the approach of combining all three perspectives. Formosa himself advocates a combination approach.²²

II. 1. 1. Formosa's combination theory of evil acts

Formosa discusses what nature of harm suffered by the victim should be included as the harm component in a combination approach to evil action. He draws on Kekes to suggest life-ending and life-wrecking harms as morally significant for evil. Life-wrecking harms include, as well as great physical suffering and pain, such harms as "inhibit one's ability to perform normal human activities" and "hinder one's ability to maintain, nurture, develop and begin new relationships with other persons."²³

For the perpetrator component, Formosa suggests both the motive of the perpetrator and the effect on said perpetrator after doing harm as significant factors. Formosa grants that perpetrators who "feel unclean and physically sick with remorse and regret" after inflicting harm are likely to be judged less evil.²⁴ When it comes to motive, both the strength and type can be qualifiers for evil. Inflicting harm on another for gratuitous reasons, without a strong incentive for the act which is hard to overcome, like jealousy, is more often regarded as evil. Certain types of motive, sadism or malice for example, count more towards evil than others.²⁵

¹⁹ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", *The Journal of Value Inquiry*, vol. 42, iss. 2, 2008, p. 219.

²⁰ Claudia Card, *The Atrocity Paradigm*, p. 3.

²¹ Eve Garrard, "The Nature of Evil", *Philosophical Explorations*, vol. 1, iss. 1, 1998, pp. 43–60.

²² Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 230.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 229.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 226.

For the bystander approach part of his combination theory, Formosa sets out to identify "what it is about evil acts that make them morally unjustifiable."²⁶ He notes the many considerations that are made when summing up justifiability, situations such as wartime opposed to peacetime, or a sincere belief in a topsy-turvy moral code, or bad upbringing. However, Formosa sees these bystander considerations as having the least weight when summing up an action to see whether it is evil.²⁷

Formosa's theory of evil acts thus includes:

a number of factors involved in a judgment of evil that must be weighed in combination in order to reach an overall judgment about whether or not, all things considered, an act has gone beyond the pale of mere wrongdoing.²⁸

He means for his theory to be useful in identifying and encompassing all aspects that are relevant when it comes to moral judgement. Evil, Formosa states, is a sub-class of moral wrongs which merit "our very strongest moral condemnation".²⁹ Evil actions differ from ordinary wrongs by being more extreme, after a careful summing-up of all the relevant factors.

Other theorists see evil as being qualitatively distinct from wrongdoing. Todd Calder takes such a standpoint, outlined in the next section.

II. 1. 2. Calder's qualitative distinction of evil action from wrongdoing

Todd Calder, defending his view of there being qualitative difference between evil-doing and wrongdoing, gives a theory of evil acts as having:

at least two essential components:

- (1) Significant harm, and
- (2) What I call an e-motivation. By an e-motivation I mean an inexcusable intention to bring about, allow, or witness, the significant harm of (1) for an unworthy goal.³⁰

The nature of a qualitative difference for Calder does not require these components to be completely absent in acts of mere wrongdoing. Rather, he states that "[i]t is sufficient that evil

²⁶ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 223.

²⁷ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 227.

²⁸ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 230.

²⁹ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 231.

³⁰ Todd Calder, "Is evil just very wrong?", *Philosophical Studies*, vol. 163, iss. 1, 2013, p. 188.

acts have a quality that merely wrongful acts do not have *essentially* to any degree."³¹ Thus, while many wrongful acts may contain a harm-component, there are just as many wrongful acts that do not – for example cheating on a test or lying to one's mother. Tables and chairs both share the quality "used for sitting on", but to different degrees. While a table may be sat upon, the quality of "used for sitting on" is not an essential component of what makes up a table. For chairs, however, the quality "used for sitting on" *is* an essential component.³²

Causing significant harm is not an essential condition of wrongness. In fact, wrongness may not even be a component of evil action – or evilness and wrongness might only coincide incidentally.³³ The idea that acts of evil may not necessarily also be morally wrong is a unique standpoint among philosophers of evil. It is important to add that Calder does not view this theory of evil as anything more than a "sketch" of a "plausible theory".³⁴ His intention is not to develop a complete and rigorous theory of evil action. Nevertheless, it is a good argument for qualitative difference.

Russell points out a flaw in Calder's account of evil:

Given that Calder offers a vague criterion for the requisite extremity of the connected harm – “a harm that a normal rational human being would take considerable pains to avoid” (Calder 2013, 188) – his account suggests that there will be many actions that fall into a grey area between the clearly evil and the merely culpably wrong.³⁵

Exploring this grey area is the object of the study in hand.

II. 1. 3. Evil personhood – a philosophical concept

Philosophers differ in the opinion of whether evil action or evil personhood should come first in a theory of evil. Singer and Haybron see evil personhood as being primary to evil action.³⁶ Others, such as Formosa, view evil people as those who regularly and without reform commit evil acts.³⁷ With this view of evil personhood comes the problem of the unlucky suicide bomber, described by Russell. Suicide bomber S1 successfully detonates his equipment on the first trial,

³¹ Todd Calder, "Is evil just very wrong?", p. 181 (original emphasis).

³² Todd Calder, "Is evil just very wrong?", p. 181.

³³ Todd Calder, "Is evil just very wrong?", p. 195, note 25.

³⁴ Todd Calder, "Is evil just very wrong?", p. 188.

³⁵ Luke Russell, *Evil*, p. 115.

³⁶ Luke Russell, *Evil*, p. 134

³⁷ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 233.

killing one person. S2 is unsuccessful and therefore repeats the attempt several times until he achieves the same result. Aggregative accounts of evil personhood, like Formosa's, see S2 as more likely to be evil because of the repeated attempted harm inflicted by the unsuccessful bombing attempts. However, it seems counter-intuitive that evil personhood be determined by luck of the draw.³⁸ Formosa gets around this by adding an intention clause to the statement "An evil person is an unreformed person who repeatedly perpetrates, *or at least intends to perpetrate*, evil acts."³⁹ So, even a person who never actually inflicts harm upon their victim could be called evil, on the strength of their intentions. This also allows for the intuition that regular, non-evil people can, at times, commit evil actions – and further that even a person who has committed multiple acts of evil can potentially be reformed, and thus be undeserving of the description evil person.⁴⁰

Another view of evil personhood is of people who are disposed to commit acts of evil, because of their personalities, thoughts, feelings, and surrounding circumstances. Dispositional accounts of evil personhood generally have more explanatory power for why a person committed an evil act, and also better encompass the intuition that there are "blameless evil people" – evil people who have not committed any evil actions.⁴¹ A big downside to dispositional accounts is that they may reveal evil personhood to be much more common than we think. The Stanley Milgram obedience experiments combined with a basic dispositional account support this dismal view.⁴² Luke Russell lands on an evil person being "someone who has a certain disposition to perform evil actions in certain circumstances."⁴³

For this study I follow the view that evil acts do not stem from evil people. Agatha Christie so often shows how evil acts can be done by the most ordinary people, who make "extraordinary choices" because of the situations they are put in.⁴⁴ As Frances Cloade in *Taken at the Flood* (1948) tells her husband:

people are *like* that – not quite bad or quite good. I don't suppose I'm particularly straight [honourable/law-abiding] myself – I have been because there hasn't been any temptation to be otherwise.⁴⁵

³⁸ Luke Russell, *Evil*, p. 147-148.

³⁹ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 233, my emphasis.

⁴⁰ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 233-234.

⁴¹ Luke Russell, *Evil*, pp. 155–156.

⁴² Luke Russell, *Evil*, p. 161.

⁴³ Luke Russell, *Evil*, p. 175.

⁴⁴ Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil: Detective Fiction and the Modern World* (London: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2009), p. 67.

⁴⁵ Agatha Christie, *Taken at the Flood* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2015), p. 39.

Doing evil does not necessarily equate with being evil. Both *Appointment with Death* and *Evil under the Sun* do, however, contain evil characters so this aspect of a concept of evil will also be discussed.

II. 2. The relationship of detective stories to morality and evil

Mary Evans in her work *The Imagination of Evil* makes the case for crime and detective fiction being some of the modern literature which most engages in the public discussion of crime, morality, and evil.⁴⁶ Evans identifies elements of detection emerging in (British) literature in the early 1800's, on the wave of the Enlightenment – decades before Edgar Allan Poe and the commonly perceived birth of the detective novel. She portrays detective fiction as being sprung from "a continuation of the Enlightenment idea that it is worthwhile to know."⁴⁷ In fact Hercule Poirot repeatedly says that it is the truth that interests him and that he will find, often warning those who come to him for help that the truth may not be to their liking.

George J. Grella, in a 1967 doctoral dissertation *The Literature of the Thriller*, also draws parallels between works of Jane Austen and the formal detective stories of the 1920's and 30's.⁴⁸ While at times slightly condescending towards the detective novel, Grella nonetheless provides an interesting analysis of its form in relation to traditional literary movements. It is also interesting as a historical perspective on how detective fiction was valued. George Grella gives an interpretation of the "murder mystery" as being the new, popular incarnation of the classic genre comedy of manners.⁴⁹ He suggests that both murderer and victim are societal undesirables who must be expelled in order to set the world to rights. While this account has plenty of explanatory power (Mrs Boynton, Lady Westholme and Arlena Marshall can all easily be interpreted in this manner as elements that need to be expelled for the good of their society), I do think it misses some of the moral complexities in the works of Agatha Christie.

Evans seems well aware of the evil-skeptic standpoint that evil as a term is contra-productive for moral discourse, that "the term 'evil' effectively halts debate, discussion and understanding about the roots of human actions."⁵⁰ Detective fiction offers a medium for this

⁴⁶ Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil*, p. 12.

⁴⁷ Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil*, p. 150.

⁴⁸ George J. Grella, *The Literature of the Thriller: A Critical Study*, unpublished Ph.D. dissertation (University of Kansas, 1967), ch. II.

⁴⁹ George Grella, *The Literature of the Thriller*, ch. II.

⁵⁰ Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil*, p. 134.

discussion which engages with, but is not limited by, contemporary political and social discourse.

II. 3. Internal scale of wrongful to evil action in the works of Agatha Christie

Michael Stone's "Scale of Evil" contains many descriptions of semi-psychopathic to fully psychopathic killers, as he descends from "justified homicide" to greater and greater depths of evil like Dante's levels of Hell.⁵¹ Agatha Christie does not use the term psychopath in general, but many of her characters display psychopathic traits. There are callous, unempathetic characters – such as murderer David Hunt in *Taken at the Flood* (1948). There are characters with grandiose tendencies, who believe themselves to be of far greater importance than the common man. Alistair Blunt in *One Two, Buckle My Shoe* (1940) commits a string of murders to protect the secret of his bigamy, in order to retain his public image and influence in British politics. There are characters who kill and harm others without feeling any remorse at all. One such character is Franklin Clarke from *The ABC Murders* (1936), who commits three 'extra' murders to cover up the one murder from which he benefitted financially, and frames an epileptic war veteran as a serial killer. Quite often such murderers are characterized as very charming, like many psychopaths.

In other novels there are some cases of "amoral" characters, like Jane Wilkinson in *Lord Edgware Dies* (1933): "Right and wrong don't exist for her."⁵² This also seems to turn the balance of the scales from evil to very wrong. She is sentenced to death, and justly so it is made clear, but the murders she committed can't be deemed fully evil action. Jane Wilkinson raises interesting questions about the necessity of knowing defiance of moral code for wrongful action. This is, however, beyond the scope of the essay in hand.

Christie's Poirot universe is so full of internal references to previous plots, and crossover characters are so common, that I feel justified in drawing on multiple sources to find clues to morality.

⁵¹ NPR staff, "On The Scale Of Evil, Where Do Murderers Rate?", *npr.org*, 21/08/2010, <https://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=129175964&t=1585663349106> [accessed 05/04/2020].

⁵² Agatha Christie, *Lord Edgware Dies* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 2007), p. 46.

II. 3. 1. Hercule Poirot's moral compass

Detective Hercule Poirot is central to both *Appointment* and *Evil*. In order to compare these novels for their treatment of evil in the coming chapter, I include here a little background to Poirot's moral code.

Evans points out that Poirot's closing sentiment in his first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) – 'The happiness of one man and woman is the greatest thing in all the world' – ushers him in as "something of a transgressive figure in the pages of detective fiction, a man who asserts the primacy of the private world and the world of emotions".⁵³ I think Evans' remark also illuminates an important feature of the internal morality of Christie's universe: the primacy of the individual. This is why Poirot, however sympathetic to Alistair Blunt's politics in *One, Two, Buckle my Shoe*, cannot allow Blunt's disregard for the lives of ordinary people to pass.

The Truth is Poirot's guiding light, and even though he often warns clients who seek him out that the truth may not be what they want to hear, the Truth is always shown to have the best purging qualities. Only once the Truth is revealed can the remaining innocent characters settle down to health and happiness, like the fairy-tale epilogue in *Appointment with Death* which is further discussed in the next chapter. The Truth has cathartic properties for the innocent.

Poirot's dedication to truth rather than to legal justice means that he can offer sympathetic murderers the 'gentleman's way out' of suicide, instead of their facing arrest and trial. As murder carried the death penalty at the time, suicide merely allowed the murderer to exit on their own terms – thus sparing their relations the pain of a highly publicised criminal trial. The murderers in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), *Dumb Witness* (1937), and *Appointment with Death* are all permitted to remove themselves in this fashion, thereby protecting their loved ones from notoriety and scandal. This courtesy is, however, not extended to any and every murderer, as exemplified by Poirot's confrontation with Franklin Clarke:

With an incredibly rapid motion he whipped out a small automatic from his pocket and held it to his head.

I gave a cry and involuntarily flinched as I waited for the report.

But no report came – the hammer clicked harmlessly.

Clarke stared at it in astonishment and uttered an oath.

⁵³ Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil*, p. 60.

'No, Mr Clarke,' said Poirot. 'You may have noticed I had a new manservant today – a friend of mine – an expert sneak thief. He removed your pistol from your pocket, unloaded it, and returned it, all without you being aware of the fact.'⁵⁴

Poirot's commitment to truth is not his only motivation for solving murder mysteries. He is acutely sensible of the way one murder increases the probability of committing more murders. After Mrs Tanios' suicide in *Dumb Witness*, Poirot appeals to her widowed husband that it was surely for the best – both for her children's sakes and because "[t]here would have been more deaths. First yours – then possibly, under certain circumstances, Miss Lawson's. And so it goes on."⁵⁵

Incidentally in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934), the only Poirot novel where the detective allows the murderers to escape justice entirely, it is made clear that the murder of Ratchett passes unprosecuted because the murderers acted jury, judge and executioner. "Say what you like, trial by jury is a sound system" states one of the murderers.⁵⁶ Even in *Five Little Pigs* (1942), where Poirot is fully aware how difficult it will be to prosecute the actual murderer Elsa Greer, and gain a posthumous pardon for Caroline Crale who was wrongly convicted – he fully intends to bring his new (correct) solution to the attention of the police.

Poirot has his own faith, often invoking "le bon Dieu". As an ex-policeman he has however no illusions about the iniquities of human wickedness. When Reverend Stephen Lane tries to put the murder of Arlena Marshall down to divine intervention, Poirot makes clear: "Not struck down – *strangled*. Strangled, Mr. Lane, by a pair of human hands."⁵⁷ What can be gauged of Hercule Poirot's moral code from his other cases provides some keys to disentangling the study in hand.

⁵⁴ Agatha Christie, *The ABC Murders* (HarperCollinsPublishers, 2010), e-book, p. 499–500.

⁵⁵ Agatha Christie, *Dumb Witness* (London: Pan Books Ltd., 1949), p. 249.

⁵⁶ Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* (HarperCollinsPublishers, 2010), e-book, p. 250.

⁵⁷ Agatha Christie, *Evil under the Sun* (Berne: Phoenix Publishing Co. Ltd, 1946), p. 155 original emphasis.

III. COMPARISON OF *APPOINTMENT WITH DEATH* AND *EVIL UNDER THE SUN*

The two detective novels in this study were chosen for their similarities: they were published close in time to each other; both feature Christie's most famous detective Hercule Poirot, who is in both cases involved in the case by the happenstance of his holidaying on the spot; the world in both cases seems generally better off for the removal of the victims. The two stories differ, however, in whether the murder committed appears to be a case of evil action or not. I will give a short summary of the two novels, before moving on to analyze some key factors of each with regard to the effect of these factors on the moral issue. Throughout I will often use shortened versions of the titles: *Appointment* and *Evil*. For the sake of simplicity, in this section all direct quotations from the novels are followed by a page reference in brackets.

Appointment with Death, first published in 1938, is one of the few Christie novels set outside of England. The plot centers around Mrs Boynton, on holiday in the Middle East with her children: Lennox and his wife Nadine, Carol, Raymond and Ginevra (Jinny). Mrs Boynton is quickly shown to be a domestic tyrant who engages and revels in the psychological abuse of her children. In Jerusalem, the family party catches the attention of young doctor Sarah King, who quickly falls in love with Raymond Boynton. Sarah King also makes friends with Dr. Gerard, esteemed psychologist, and gets him interested in the Boyntons. For the first half of the story, Poirot is almost conspicuously absent; in the prologue he overhears a snippet of conversation from his hotel window in Jerusalem, but in the main narrative he is mentioned only in passing.

King and Gerard leave Jerusalem on a tour to Petra, together with Lady Westholme, spinster Miss Pierce and Jefferson Cope – longtime friend of Nadine Boynton. In Petra they are surprised to meet the Boynton family again. The evening of the next day, Mrs Boynton is found dead. Dr. Gerard is unconvinced with the death being put down to natural causes and involves Colonel Carbury. Poirot, guest of the colonel's in Amman, is thus roped in to find out what happened.

Suspicion is (of course) levelled at the Boynton family. Their shared motive to get rid of their mother, for both psychological and monetary freedom, is compelling. This also gives Nadine and even Sarah motives – to help the men they love. In the end, Poirot's solution points to Lady Westholme as the culprit, and it is implied that she shoots herself.

Three years and five novels later, *Evil under the Sun* was published. It has a more classic "whodunit" structure where the murder occurs approximately one third in to the story and the star detective is involved every step of the way. Nonetheless, it too is full of that "strong ironical undertone that calls upon readers to question everything" which Gulddal notes as a feature of Christie's fiction.⁵⁸ Hercule Poirot is on holiday at a seaside resort somewhere in Devonshire/Cornwall. The other guests are a middle-aged American couple; the uncouth Horace Blatt (red herring); spinster Miss Emily Brewster; mentally ill pastor Stephen Lane; cool, calm, and efficient Rosamund Darnley; Patrick Redfern and his wife Christine; and Captain Marshall with his daughter from a previous marriage, Linda, and his current wife Arlena.

Arlena Marshall is found strangled, by Redfern and Brewster, after getting up early one morning to meet what everyone supposed would be Patrick Redfern. They were having an affair. Linda Marshall is consumed with guilt and fear that she caused her stepmother's death by black magic, after she experimented with voodoo. Rosamund and Captain Marshall suspect each other, and so give each other false alibis. Reverend Stephen Lane, recovering from a nervous breakdown, has an obsession with evil and "scarlet women" which places him under suspicion as well.

The murderer turns out to be the one person it was thought physically impossible – Patrick Redfern – together with his accomplice Christine Redfern, deemed psychologically impossible as the murderer. It is revealed that this is not the first planned murder they have committed. Some years previously they used a similar contrived alibi to kill Patrick's wife, Alice Corrigan.

III. 1. Setting – savagery and sacrifice

There is an idea that in the archetypal, 'cosy', Agatha Christie mystery, setting is not an important feature. It has been said that all her mysteries take place in variants of the idealized English country house. While this setting is not uncommon, neither is it really the norm, and there is always commentary to the effect that country houses filled with country guests do not exist in reality or at least belong to the past. I agree with Jesper Gulddal that this idea of setting

⁵⁸ Jesper Gulddal, "'That deep underground savage instinct' narratives of sacrifice and retribution in Agatha Christie's *Appointment with Death*", *Textual Practice*, 2019, p. 3.

being unimportant is especially untrue in the case of *Appointment*.⁵⁹ Here, the Middle Eastern, ancient civilization setting is an integral part of the story. Gulddal shows how the Middle Eastern setting contributes to the double-narrative of the story, which juxtaposes Poirot's modern, coolly rational solution with underlying ripples of pre-civilisational savagery and human sacrifice.⁶⁰

Jerusalem and Petra have a double nature from the first. On the surface, the conscious world, the hotel in Jerusalem is a modern crossroads, filled with cosmopolitan tourists bent on 'doing' the sights. However, there is already a mystical under-layer, the unconscious world, perhaps centered around Mrs Boynton. She is at once a small matriarch, "a stupid, malignant, pathetic, posturing old woman" (p. 63–64) whose domination extends only over four people, and a larger-than-life figure of primordial evil, likened to animals or mythical beings: "a distorted old Buddha" (p. 14); "cobra" (p. 26); "basilisk" (p. 64); "dragon" (p. 87); and "obscene idol" (p. 201).⁶¹ Dr Gerard, male doctor and figurehead of reason, notes this double nature upon first observing the Boyntons: "Here is a commonplace devoted American family revelling in Palestine – and I weave a story of black magic around it!" (p. 27). When the setting changes from Jerusalem, starting point of Judeo-Christianity, to Petra, a site of pre-civilisational savage instincts, the journey makes overt the transition down into the subconscious.⁶²

The ride was like a dream. It seemed to her afterwards that it was like the pit of Hell opening at one's feet. The way wound down – down into the ground. The shapes of rock rose up round them – down, down into the bowels of the earth, through a labyrinth of red cliffs. They towered now on either side. Sarah felt stifled – menaced by the ever-narrowing gorge. (p. 75)

The murder of Mrs Boynton is transported to a mythical space, removed from civilisation's constraints on morality.⁶³ The mythical subtext becomes in this setting real, just like the tourists' dream of the rose-coloured city becomes "much more real than that – it's as real as – as raw beef." (p. 81) In such a place, the idea of human sacrifice becomes a serious possibility even to that most modern thing, a young doctor. "I think sometimes, don't you, that a sacrifice is necessary... I mean, one can have too much regard for life" (p. 83), Sarah King muses to her older colleague. Although Poirot's solution eventually discards such sacrificial motives, the

⁵⁹ Jesper Gulddal, "'That deep underground savage instinct' narratives of sacrifice and retribution in Agatha Christie's *Appointment with Death*", p. 11-12.

⁶⁰ Jesper Gulddal, "narratives of sacrifice and retribution"

⁶¹ Agatha Christie, *Appointment with death* (London: HarperCollinsPublishers, 1993).

⁶² Jesper Gulddal, "narratives of sacrifice and retribution", p. 12.

⁶³ Jesper Gulddal, "narratives of sacrifice and retribution", p. 12-13.

underlying narrative is reinforced by the fairytale-like epilogue. This second ending to the story sees all the Boyntons successfully coupled off with the other characters from the Middle Eastern holiday (excepting Miss Pierce), suggesting that the sacrifice was indeed carried out.⁶⁴

The setting of *Evil under the Sun* is more familiar and more straightforward; just another watering-hole of the English upper-middle classes. It adheres perfectly to what Grella describes as the typical detective story, whose premise is "a group of people assembled at an isolated place".⁶⁵ The names of the hotel and island – the Jolly Roger and Smuggler's respectively – perhaps seem evocative of ruthless criminals and violence. In the case of the Jolly Roger Hotel, this possibility is subverted before it can arise in the mind of the reader. The opening scene of the novel is a short history of how the hotel came into being, built by an eccentric sea captain Roger Angmaring at the turn of the previous century. Of course, Smuggler's Island foreshadows the red herring that is Horace Blatt's heroin smuggling racket, which turns out to be completely separate from the murder.

The formulaic backdrop turns out to be just a backdrop. In Poirot's own words, such a setting requires no further explanation in any coming event: "*Parbleu!* it is August – one is on one's holiday. It is quite natural, you see, for you to be here and for Major Barry to be here and for Mrs. Redfern and her husband to be here." (p. 15) Together with the allusion on page 8 to the events in *Death on the Nile* (1937), almost the first things to be said, and the solution is known before the mystery is even presented. *Death on the Nile* also portrays a supposed love-triangle, where two of its participants murder the third and contrive to give each other alibis. The connection between the two plots is later reinforced, with a short jump out of chronology where the unnamed narrator reflects back on a conversation they had with Poirot after the events in *Evil* had come to a close. "Hercule Poirot, with a sigh, said as he had said once before in Egypt, that if a person is determined to commit murder it is not easy to prevent him." (p. 37) Hence, before the murder has even occurred, the static background and the mystery's resolution are already cleared out of the way. What remains is space for reflection on the nature of evil.

Evil is a major concern in the novel, as perhaps is obvious from the title *Evil under the Sun*. The stage is set for a discussion of the nature of evil by Stephen Lane's harangue:

Nowadays, no one believes in evil. It is considered, at most, a mere negation of good. Evil, people say, is done by those who know no better – who are undeveloped – who are to be pitied rather than blamed. But M. Poirot, evil is *real!* It is a *fact!* I believe in Evil like I believe in Good. It exists! It is powerful! It walks the earth! (p. 16, original emphases)

⁶⁴ Jesper Gulddal, "narratives of sacrifice and retribution", p. 14.

⁶⁵ George Grella, *The Literature of the Thriller*, p. 9.

Situating a coming discussion of evil among the socially prosperous might seem incongruous, but this is one of the things Christie does best. The rich and powerful, engaged in the most innocent pursuit of a seaside holiday, are not to be taken at their face value and "nothing in the social world is quite what it seems."⁶⁶

In both *Appointment* and *Evil*, setting is an important aspect for framing the moral judgement of the murders. For *Appointment*, the Petra setting provides access to the subconscious and a mythical space where sacrifice is morally possible. In the case of *Evil*, the expected nature of the setting offsets any preconceived notions about evil.

III. 2. The character of the murder victim

Poirot frequently makes the point that without understanding the victim, the mystery of who killed them cannot be solved. *Appointment* and *Evil* are no different: "it is the psychology of Mrs Boynton herself that is the most important thing in this case" (*Appointment*, p. 208) and "Until we can understand fully and completely *exactly what kind of a person Arlena Marshall was*, we shall not be able to see clearly *the kind of person who murdered her*." (*Evil*, p. 82). To the modern reader, this seems dangerously to approach victim blaming. I interpret Poirot generously as meaning that the life and likes of a victim can provide essential clues to their murderer, since, especially in murder mysteries, the murderer is most often to be found in the victim's inner circle. I also suggest that the character of the victim is important for the moral judgement of an action against them, even though Poirot himself, speaking in *Appointment*, would contradict me:

The victim may be one of the good God's saints – or, on the contrary – a monster of infamy. It moves me not. The fact is the same. A life – taken! I say it always – I do not approve of murder. (p. 117)

Mrs Boynton is obviously and irredeemably an unsavoury character, as her introduction makes clear to the reader: "Old, swollen, bloated, sitting there immovable in the midst of them – a distorted old Buddha – a gross spider in the centre of a web!" (p. 14) She is no ordinary matriarch, as Dr Gerard is quick to notice. Her grown-up children are genuinely suffering: Lennox has the exhausted demeanor of one who has given up, "the look you see in a wounded

⁶⁶ Mary Evans, *The Imagination of Evil*, p. 59.

dog or a sick horse" (p. 23), worrying his wife Nadine so that she no longer looks on him as a husband and an equal, but as a child she needs to mother.⁶⁷ Raymond and Carol are both wound up and so full of nervous tension that breakdown seems imminent.⁶⁸ Jinny, the youngest, appears to have retreated into a psychosis with some worrying tendencies. Mrs Boynton is a fascinating study of psychological abuse and its effects on the target. So important is it to properly chronicle this abuse, and the effect it has on the children, that she is not murdered until almost half-way through the story.⁶⁹ The longer-than-usual run-up to the murder, generally the starting point of a murder mystery, emphasises the importance of judging Mrs Boynton's own actions preceding her death.

Their invisible prison makes the Boynton children different from everyone else, which this holiday brings home painfully to them: "If only we could be like other people instead of being as we are – all queer and warped and *wrong*." (p. 10) Jefferson Cope notices this too, although he wrongly attributes their strangeness to a purposeful shirking of societal duties: "Not one of them has got the least social sense. The community spirit – that's what's lacking!" (p. 34) The evil Mrs Boynton works on her children is thus typical of destructive element in the comedy of manners form described by Grella.⁷⁰

In *Evil*, Arlena Marshall is only described by direct speech of the other characters, and not by the (albeit limited) third person narrator as Mrs Boynton is in *Appointment*. It is the character Miss Brewster who introduces Arlena as "a personification of evil!" already on page 18. Reverend Stephen Lane, who opens the novel's discussion of evil, "drew in his breath with a little hiss and his figure stiffened" (p. 18) at the sight of her. From Arlena's stepdaughter, Linda, we get the opinion "She's quite, quite bad" (p. 30). She dies rather faster than Mrs Boynton (less than one third of the way in), more in keeping with the whodunit-form.⁷¹ Poirot's own opinion of Arlena, however, remains hidden from the reader until the resolution of the mystery.

In both cases, the deaths of Mrs Boynton and Arlena Marshall seem to have only positive consequences. The Boynton children are liberated and can settle down as happy, contributive members of society. Upon discovering the body of Arlena, one of Miss Brewster's first thoughts is "Best thing that could have happened for him [meaning Patrick Redfern] and

⁶⁷ Agatha Christie, *Appointment with death*, p. 27.

⁶⁸ Agatha Christie, *Appointment with Death*, p. 21-22.

⁶⁹ Agatha Christie, *Appointment with Death*, p. 91-92 out of 218.

⁷⁰ George Grella, *The Literature of the Thriller*, pp. 29–32.

⁷¹ Agatha Christie, *Evil under the Sun*, p. 66 out of 237.

his wife – and for Marshall and the child" (p. 68), well in keeping with the idea that Arlena was a bad lot. Miss Brewster's comment turns out to be deeply ironical. The murder of Arlena Marshall was committed by the Redfern couple, motivated by their self-interest, but ultimately leads to their downfall. The second part of Brewster's comment does however come true since the novel closes on Linda finally entering adulthood, and her father captain Marshall finding a much more suitable partner in Rosamund Darnley.

The personality and actions of Mrs Boynton are vital for the moral judgement of her murder. Arlena Marshall's character is equally vital, but in her case vital for underlining the importance of truth over general opinion.

III. 3. Confrontation with the murderer

Grella's 'comedy of manners' interpretation notes the "ambivalent position" of the murderer and explains why they sometimes are allowed to escape justice. Amongst others, the expulsion of "a social evil" by way of murder warrants sympathy from the reader, and perhaps also from the detective.⁷² This is certainly the case of Lady Westholme, who, by killing the grotesque Mrs Boynton, has saved the Boynton children and put society to rights again. She is herself an undesirable (being annoying and unwomanly) and therefore more easily expelled than the sympathetic young Boyntons. I think, however, that the detective's method of dealing with his accused murderers reveals something more than this about the moral standing of those murderer's actions.

It is implied that Lady Westholme commits suicide upon overhearing Poirot's narrative of the events. She is allowed to take the gentlemanly way out and does not even have to face the 'shame' of being denounced in front of the victim's family. This sympathetic treatment is not extended by Poirot to just any murderer, as mentioned in chapter II. Jesper Gulddal further describes how Lady Westholme's death can also be read as a sacrifice for the sake of the Boyntons.⁷³ The underlying sacrificial narrative contributes to expunging Lady Westholme of evil.

Gulddal notes the many "logical inconsistencies" of the final show-down in relation to our understanding of the characters gained from the rest of the narrative.⁷⁴ Why is Lady

⁷² George Grella, *The Literature of the Thriller*, p. 33.

⁷³ Jesper Gulddal, "narratives of sacrifice and retribution", p. 15.

⁷⁴ Jesper Gulddal, "narratives of sacrifice and retribution", p. 5.

Westholme not invited to this denouement? Why should she commit suicide when the evidence against her is so flimsy, and, by admission of detective and police colonel, would not stand up in court? All of this is, to my mind, another aspect that makes the murder in *Appointment* not evil action. Lady Westholme by choosing to commit suicide redeems her action.

The solution in *Appointment* stands in stark contrast to the revelation scene in *Evil*, in which Poirot goads the culprit into implicating himself. The charming Patrick Redfern's true nature is revealed: "his handsome face was transformed, suffused with blood, blind with rage. It was the face of a killer – of a tiger." (p. 218) Redfern, accused, launches himself at Poirot bent on strangling him. His preferred method of strangulation also denotes his evil character, "a killer for pleasure as well as for profit." (p. 231) This scene exposes Redfern as a societal imposter, allowing him to be comfortably dismissed in the comedy of manners reading.⁷⁵ With Poirot's solution comes also the added damning qualities that Redfern and his partner carefully and unprovoked planned the murder of Arlena, and afterwards set about to frame first captain Marshall and then Linda. The way the Redferns used Linda's youth and naivety, carefully working on her own feelings of guilt and presenting her with the means to commit suicide, is especially callous.

After the confrontation with the Redferns, Poirot and Linda have a conversation about culpability. Poirot tells her:

The wish to kill and the action of killing are two different things. If in your bedroom instead of a little wax figure you had had your stepmother bound and helpless and a dagger in your hand instead of a pin, you would not have pushed it into her heart! Something within you would have said 'no.' (p. 233)

This is a final absolution of Linda's guilt, and a clue that truly evil action involves some silencing of that voice which says 'no.' There is a hint that evil action requires something more on the side of a perpetrator than just an instrumental desire that someone should die.

In Poirot's solution, Lady Westholme came to Petra because Mrs Boynton compelled her. While this does not stand up to internal chronology, pointed out by Gulddal, it leaves an impression that Westholme's hand was forced. She killed Mrs Boynton because she saw an opportunity, after being recognised in Jerusalem and threatened with exposure. Patrick and Christine Redfern, however, followed Arlena Marshall on holiday with the express intention of killing her. The plan was all thought out and inevitable from the novel's beginning.

⁷⁵ George Grella, *The Literature of the Thriller*, p. 33.

In all Poirot novels, the detective's final confrontation with the murderer serves to reveal the true nature of the murderer as much as the solution to the mystery. Lady Westholme's choice to remove herself is a redeeming factor of her action, whereas Patrick Redfern shows his true evil nature by his violent reaction.

IV. EVIL OR VERY WRONG?

I have given some reasons why one murder is evil and the other not. Now I will attempt to place these findings in a theoretical framework. From the previous chapter, two counts of evil action and one count of wrongful action arise. The wrongful, but not evil, action is Lady Westholme's murder of Mrs Boynton in *Appointment with Death*. *Appointment* does contain evil action as well, namely Mrs Boynton's prolonged psychological abuse of her dependents. Lastly, we have the titular evil of *Evil under the Sun* – the murder of Arlena Marshall.

There are many things which subtly enhance and change the moral judgements of the two murders. In these judgements, victim and perpetrator perspectives both have their place. There also appear to be certain psychological hallmarks of evil action. Evil is always wrong yet is different in some way from ordinary wrongdoing.

IV. 1. Psychologically thick evil

In *Appointment* the most striking example of evil action is that which is perpetrated by Mrs Boynton. While she may not abuse her children physically, the harm inflicted is obviously great. The Boynton children's suffering certainly falls under Formosa's descriptions of life-wrecking harm. This carries weight in the judging of Mrs Boynton's actions. Mrs Boynton is motivated by her wish to exert power over others, and she abuses that position of authority which a parent has over her children. Further, she takes real pleasure in thwarting her children's attempts to break free and enter into relationships, friendly or romantic, with other people. There are no morally justifying qualities to be found. In Formosa's language, Mrs Boynton certainly earns "our very strongest moral condemnations."⁷⁶

Conversely, are all Mrs Boynton's morally reprehensible qualities enough to turn the scales when it comes to Lady Westholme's act of murdering her? The novel's structure suggest that they are. While life-ending harm is thus inflicted on Mrs Boynton, her death means the removal of the life-wrecking harm from the four Boynton children. Westholme does not act out of altruism, however, as her motive is the self-interested one of keeping her criminal past a secret and maintaining her place in society. Mrs Boynton threatened Westholme's new life and the career in politics she made for herself. This motivation is rather weak, although it is possible

⁷⁶ Paul Formosa, "A Conception of Evil", p. 236.

to see Westholme's action as provoked by Mrs Boynton's threats of exposure. Formosa includes as a relevant aspect the idea of what effect the harm done by a perpetrator has upon the perpetrator. From the narrative in *Appointment* we are given no clues as to this effect, except for the fact that Westholme commits suicide – despite the legal evidence against her being markedly flimsy. With evidence from the extensive Poirot universe, being permitted to, and choosing, to take this way out is indicative of Westholme's remorse and attrition. On the whole, and strongly supported by the restoration to health and happiness of the remaining Boyntons, Lady Westholme's action does not seem deserving of our strongest moral condemnation.

The murder of Arlena Marshall does deserve our strongest moral condemnation. She was first unwittingly used for money, and then killed when she became a greater liability than asset. The Redferns arrived at the Jolly Roger with the sole intention of ending Arlena's life. While Arlena was no moral saint herself, and is hinted at having inflicted some harm on her step-daughter, her character is largely misunderstood by the other characters in the novel. She is killed by strangling, commented on as a method employed by people who enjoy killing. Patrick Redfern is also shown to have previously strangled his wife. As to the effect on the perpetrator after the harmful action, both Patrick and Christine put all their efforts into finding and framing a suitable scapegoat. That they choose sixteen-year-old Linda as scapegoat is extra morally reprehensible; life-wrecking, as we see the trauma of guilt acting upon her, and potentially life-ending as she nearly dies from an overdose of Christine Redfern's sleeping pills.

In Calder's account of evil, the death of Arlena Marshall is certainly a significant harm. Although it is very possible to read her death as being good-maximising – in that the world is better off without her as per Miss Brewster's comment – Arlena herself did not wish to die. Arlena's murder also contains the requisite e-motivation described by Calder. Patrick Redfern's motive for the murder is to eliminate a source of annoyance, now that all usefulness (that is to say money) has been extracted. The "goal" for Redfern is to cover up his previous acts of extorting a fortune from the gullible Arlena, before he is faced with an uncomfortable confrontation from Arlena's husband. This goal lacks even a superficial veneer of worthiness.

Does the abuse suffered by the Boynton family warrant the judgement of evil in Calder's theory? Again, I would posit that criterion (1) – that of significant harm resulting from the action – is fulfilled. The restricted life, constant fear and humiliation of the Boynton children are surely things that "a normal rational human being would take considerable pains to avoid."⁷⁷ Mrs Boynton's e-motivation is indisputable, as I have described above.

⁷⁷ Todd Calder, "Is evil just very wrong?", p. 188.

Calder's qualities of evil action are, then, successful at denoting the evil action we want them to. How about the murder of Mrs Boynton in *Appointment with Death*? Again, her murder can reasonably be interpreted as constituting "significant harm" to the victim – but in this case the total good brought about by her death is much greater. Mrs Boynton's death meant that society gained four happy, well-adjusted, contributing adults. The underlying narrative of sacrifice, discussed in the previous chapter, reinforces the idea of Mrs Boynton's death being justifiable. We start to question whether the murder is even a wrongful act.

As for the e-motivation of Lady Westholme, things get sticky. Is Westholme's wish to not be tormented by Mrs Boynton a worthy enough goal to warrant the significant harm she inflicts on Mrs Boynton? On the one hand, Westholme commits murder out of a purely selfish desire to retain the good place in society she has found for herself. On the other hand, her intention is excusable what with all we know about the character of Mrs Boynton. Here lies the problem of Calder's criteria. He takes great pains to show how Hitler, benchmark of evil action, must be classified as evil in his theory. However, this theory of evil might engulf too many actions, thereby 'watering down' the concept of evil.

Calder's two essential components rule out the possibility of an act being evil that did not cause "significant harm", so say a failed bombing-attempt would not be evil. This also exonerates Linda Marshall, who could otherwise be seen as possessing the required e-motivation. The making and melting of a wax effigy of her stepmother to perform voodoo can be understood as intention to bring about significant harm, although it might perhaps qualify as "excusable" in that Linda did not really believe that her black magic would kill Arlena. Poirot's absolution of Linda's guilt hints at the idea of conscience which would have prevented Linda from committing evil action. This could be connected to Garrard's proposal of evil actions as containing a mechanism of metaphysical silencing of the reasons *against* committing those acts.

The psychological hallmarks of malice and sadistic pleasure in causing harm, present in the murder of Arlena Marshall, are absent from Lady Westholme's action. On the surface, both Westholme and Redfern act from a motivation of self-preservation. The surrounding considerations make this motivation stronger for Westholme and weaker for Redfern. The titular evil of *Evil under the Sun* appears to be a psychologically thick concept. However, the limitation of only comparing two novels means that I cannot draw any general conclusion of evil being always psychologically thick in Christie's plots. The difference between the murders in *Appointment* compared with *Evil* seems to be a quantitative difference, where all the relevant considerations tally to make Redfern's action evil.

IV. 2. Evil personhood

In *Lady Westholme* we find our classic Christie murderer of an ordinary non-evil person (albeit with a criminal history) brought to extraordinary action by her circumstances. As readers, we sympathize with her action, even though she is an irritating character herself. Much of this sympathy arises from what we have learned about the victim Mrs Boynton, who is such an evil character.

Dr Gerard makes an illuminating comment about Mrs Boynton and her former employment: "She does not love tyranny *because she has been a wardress*. Let us rather say *that she became a wardress because she loved tyranny*." (p. 41, original emphases) Mrs Boynton, might have been accurately described as an evil person before she committed the evil actions against her children or even against the inmates of her prison. The example of Mrs Boynton leans toward a dispositional account of evil personhood.

In *Evil under the Sun* the denouement reveals that the titular evil, felt by Poirot from the beginning, emanated from Patrick Redfern rather than from Arlena Marshall. It is possible that the one murder of Arlena alone would not have earned him the epithet evil. However, Arlena's was not the first murder Redfern committed and since the motivation for Arlena's murder is more gratuitous than for his first (the murder of his wife Alice Corrigan), Patrick appears to be making murder a habit. He might very potentially start to seek out the pleasure he takes in killing for its own sake, instead of that pleasure just being a perk of the job. The increased probability of repeat murders is felt strongly by Poirot, forming part of his motivation to solve crime.

V. CONCLUSION

At a first glance, the murders of Mrs Boynton and Arlena Marshall appear to be very similar. I have attempted to show why the one is to be viewed as merely keeping an appointment with death, while the other is an act of evil.

The treatments of the central murders in *Appointment with Death* and *Evil under the Sun* reveal notions about how moral judgements are formed. Murder is not always equally condemnable. Many factors – including the personality of the victim, motivation and intention of the perpetrator, and subsequent actions and reactions of the perpetrator – contribute to making an act evil or not. Hercule Poirot's method of dealing with his accused murderer reveals much about whether that murderer deserves our strongest moral condemnation, to use Formosa's mark of evil action. The fact that Poirot gives Lady Westholme the opportunity to commit suicide, honour intact, contributes greatly to the impression that her action of murdering Mrs Boynton is at least a lesser evil action than Patrick Redfern's murder of Arlena Marshall. Other relevant factors are the evil personhood of Mrs Boynton herself, as well as an absence of sadistic pleasure in the killing which is present in Redfern. Evil action does not appear to be truly qualitatively distinct, in Calder's terms, from wrongful action. Evil is always wrong.

I have also attempted to show that Agatha Christie's stories stand up to closer scrutiny and may be rich sources of shared intuitions about evil and moral wrongs. Rather than being reduced to mathematical formulae, their plots and characters merit analysis. *Evil under the Sun* could certainly be subjected to further analysis of its portrayal of evil feelings and discussion of culpability, which are beyond the scope of this essay.

While trying to separate the moral judgement of actions from the moral judgments of the agents in my two chosen Christie novels, this ultimately proved a difficult task. In these works, as in real life, the evilness is all mixed up. My chosen novels also contradict my starting intuition of it being possible for non-evil people to commit evil actions, as both examples of evil action are perpetrated by the evil characters Mrs Boynton and Patrick Redfern.

Christie's detective stories deserve to be more acknowledged for the nuanced and many-faceted ways that they portray human wrongdoing and evil.

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