Pázmány Péter Catholic University
Faculty of Humanities
English Department

Feminine Trifles:

The Construction of Gender Roles in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* and in Modern English and American Crime Stories

Női apróságok:

A nemi szerepek megkonstruálása Susan Glaspell *Trifles* című drámájában valamint modern angol és amerikai detektív történenekben

MA Thesis

Written by: Zsuzsanna Benkő

Supervisor: László Munteán

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I. Introduction

In my thesis, by examining Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, the crime stories of Agatha Christie, and 21st century adaptations of Miss Marple, it can be seen, that women and the concept of trifles are linked in (detective) literature. I am going to illustrate that in these crime stories female and effeminized characters are associated with definite personal characteristics, attitudes and behaviour, because of gendered stereotypes and culturally ascribed roles. The presence of the "female sphere" determines the perception and the concept of justice as well, and it sheds light on stereotypical differences between the sexes. How women and men interpret actual situations is influenced by their learned behavioural patterns that subscribe to their stereotypical roles defined by their social realities, which inherently generates presumptions and the imposition of pre-existing patterns on the other gender. In the works explored female and effeminized characters encounter and get entangled in such systems of subliminal presuppositions of behaviour, mental capacity, and perception based on gender, which, especially in detective fiction have a cardinal importance. Crime stories offer opportunity to observe gender confrontation in the issues of identifying and interpreting clues, and the questions of justice and morality. In my analysis I am going to illustrate the stereotypical gender differences that are comprehensively presented in these works, and discuss the evolution of the concept of the female detective triggered by the changes in stereotypical gender roles.

Susan Glaspell — Feminism and *Trifles*

The broader political an ideological environment of the 1900s, and the socialist-feminist communities that she frequented had enormous effect on the works of Susan Glaspell (1876—1948). She wrote her famous one-act play *Trifles* in 1916.[1] Besides experiencing the traditional role of being a wife Glaspell also met radical ideas through her husband George Cram Cook and her friend Eugene O'Neill, with whom they founded their own theatre company, the Provincetown Players. Because the community was deeply concerned with socialism and feminism, and Glaspell was also a founding member of a radical group of women activists (Heterodoxy Club[2]), this atmosphere rather unavoidably encouraged her to write about "female characters who desired to free themselves from the stereotypical roles into which they had been cast" (Evans). Her most famous play, *Trifles* was performed by her own company, the Provincetown Players, in which she herself played the role of Mrs Hale. [3]

The attention of the artists of the turn of the century generally concentrated on the mystical, on psychology and on several mental disorders, there are many paintings and writings concerning the dark side of the human mind, especially that of women (for

[1] Glaspell later re-wrote *Trifles* as a short story, *Jury of Her Peers*. In my analysis I work with the play.
[2] Glaspell co-founded Heterodoxy, a group of radical women activists who forged an early feminist ideology and were prominent in the feminist movement of New York in the years 1910-1920. (Smith).
[3] Susan Glaspell (1876-1948) was an American dramatist, theatre owner and producer, and novelist. On her father's side she was one of the descendants of the first settlers, and from this ancestry she inherited the experience of independence, idealism and practicality of the pioneers. After university she worked as a reporter in *Des Moines Daily Magazine*, and wrote short stories to women's magazines about the everyday Midwestern life, with its special natural regional atmosphere. She married fellow novelist George Cram Cook, and they were among the founding members of the Provincetown Players theatre group in 1915, and they wrote plays for the theatre themselves, thus giving a forum and voice for Glaspell's ideas and introducing her to new people such as Eugene O'Neill. Glaspell wrote several one-act and full-length plays for the theatre, and her play "Trifles" was first performed by the Provincetown Players in 1916, later rewritten as a short story "Jury of Her Peers" and published in 1917. After the death of her husband she continued to work as a writer, and for her play "Alison's House" she won the Pulitzer Prize for Drama in 1931. She died in 1948. (Lautner 1108., Maillakais, Evans)

example Charlotte Perkins Gilman' short story *The Yellow Wallpaper* depicting growing madness; or the paintings of Gustav Klimt and Aubrey Beardsley about devouring women like Salome.) This is the era of the frequent presentation of femme fatale and various murder stories in works of art, literature and theatre, as "theatre loves a good murder story: violence, passion and purpose. … Therefore it is not surprising that contemporary dramatists should turn to murder — to murder by women — as sources for plays." (Ben-Zvi 141). Glaspell's play *Trifles* besides joining to this mainstream phenomenon of presenting murder stories definitely has a gender-based social conflict in its centre, because "women who kill evoke fear because they challenge societal constructs of femininity — passivity, restraint and nurture, thus the rush to isolate and label the female offender, to cauterize the act. Her behaviour must be aberrant, or crazed of it is to be explicable. And explicable it must be; her crime cannot be seen as societally-driven if the cultural stereotypes are to remain unchallenged." (Ben-Zvi 141). Because Glaspell was deeply influenced by feminist ideas, the motif of the female murderer in her interpretation became interwoven with social issues concerning the status and boundaries of women in a patriarchal society. Thus one of the main themes of *Trifles* is the problematization of social boundaries, not only on the level of the female characters of the play, but also on the level of the female writer, since "… often the murderer, like the feminist [who writes the story] in her own way test society's established boundaries…. [So *Trifles*] does more than rework the tale of murder, it reveals in the telling the lineaments of the society that spawned the crime." (Ben-Zvi 142). Treating social boundaries as something that can be crossed leads to the questioning of the traditionally strict and unmoveable borderlines of law and justice. The social and the juridical boundaries of women thus overlap in a case of murder: "the process by which juridical attitudes toward, and prosecution of, women are shaped by

societal concepts of female behaviour, the same concepts that may have motivated the act of murder." (Ben-Zvi 144).

Susan Glaspell in her biography of her husband George Cram Cook offers a brief comment on the genesis of her play, *Trifles*. She tells that they needed a play for the Provincetown Players and her husband urged her to write one. She claimed it was based on an actual murder case she covered as a reporter of the *Des Moines Daily News*. She never provided names though, the only clue was her remark that she "never forgot going into the kitchen of a woman locked up in town" (Ben-Zvi 142). It was Linda Ben-Zvi in the 1980s, who discovered the murder case that Glaspell used as a source: the murder of a sixty-year-old farmer named John Hossack on December 2, 1900, in Indianola, Iowa. According to Ben-Zvi "Glaspell was an active participant in the case, … she was actually a primary contributor to the shaping of public opinion about the woman being tried" (Ben-Zvi 144). However there was nothing unique about such a case in the Iowa of 1900, Glaspell filed twenty-six stories on the Hossack case "mixing fact, rumor and commentary" (Ben-Zvi 145). [4] She was deeply influenced by the case, collected every piece of information, listened to the trial, and she was probably at the farmhouse to gather material, so no wonder that in her play *Trifles* several events are the same, or similar to the events of the murder case.[5] For example the wife sleeping beside her husband while he was being killed,

[4] Susan Glaspell reported the Hossack case from 2 December, 1900 to 13 April, 1901. (Ben-Zvi 143).

[5] The murder case is described as the following: "The case at first glance seemed simple. Some time after midnight on December 2, 199, John Hossack, a well-to-do farmer, was struck twice on the head with an axe, while he slept in bed. Margaret Hossack, his wife of thirty-three years — who was sleeping beside him — reported that a strange sound, "like two pieces of wood striking" wakened her, she jumped out of bed, went into the adjoining sitting room, saw a light shining on the wall, and heard the door to the front porch slowly closing. Only ten did she hear her husband's groans. Assembling the five of her nine children who still lived at home, she lit a lamp, re-entered the bedroom and discovered Hossack bleeding profusely, the walls and the bed sheets spattered, brain matter oozing from a five inch gash, his head crushed. One of his sons claimed that the mortally injured man was still able to speak. When he said to his father, "Well, pa, you are badly hurt," Hossack replied, "No, I'm not hurt, but I'm not feeling well." It was assumed that prowlers must have committed the crime, but when a search of the farmhouse failed to reveal any missing items, a coroner's inquest was called. Its findings were inconclusive. However, after discovering the presumed murder weapon smeared with blood under the family corn crib, and listening to reports and innuendos from neighbours, who hinted at a history of marital and family trouble, the Sheriff arrested Mrs Hossack "as a matter of precaution" (Ben-Zvi 144)

and that she showed no emotion when arrested and declined making any statement concerning her guilt or innocence. There are also correspondences for the rocking chair and the quilting: three pencil drawings were published in the *Des Moines Daily News* one showing Mrs. Hossack sitting in a rocking chair her head bent down, and the way Mrs. Hossack described the evening as being usual and that she "…was patching and darning…" (Ben-Zvi 149). One main thing is different though: we do not know the fate of Mrs. Wright in the play, but we know about the trial of Mrs Hossack.[6] Margaret Hossack has been found guilty.

The question arises whether Minnie Wright would have been found guilty on the same premises? As the main evidence against Mrs. Hossack was her emotionless behaviour and her not crying on the trial, as it might have been demanded of a 'nice wife' or a 'proper female', what would one expected in the case of Minnie Wright who showed the same attitude? As Ben-Zvi remarks about Mrs. Hossack's trial, "the jury may not have been convinced that she was guilty of murder, but she certainly was guilty of questionable female behaviour…. [and] to have found such a woman innocent or to have explored the question of justifiable homicide would have been unthinkable…" (Ben-Zvi 152). Where is justice then? John Hossack, just as John Wright in the play, has been a 'pillar of the society', whose interest had to be protected — thus the idea of a 'justifiable homicide' had been out of question. An honourable member of the society could not be investigated like this, thereby the power relations of his family, his mental (and physical) abuse and the additional circumstances could not be argued. No one addressed the central issue of the motive of the murder. Where is truth then? Consequently, were Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale

[6] Her trial began on 1 April 1901 and the verdict of the jury found Margaret Hossack guilty as charged and sentenced her to life imprisonment at hard labour. (It is interesting that the crucial point was when it turned out that Margaret Hossack had been pregnant and given birth to a child before their marriage. This provided the jury with the impression that she was a woman who could not be trusted.) Glaspell reported the outcome but made no comment on the finding. Immediately after the trial she resigned and returned home to Davenport to begin writing fiction, so she may have never heard the final disposition of the Hossack case. A new trial was held in 1903, where the jury was unable to reach a verdict and finally Mrs Hossack was ordered released and was allowed to return to her home, her guilt or innocence still in question (Ben-Zvi 142-151.)

in the play right to conceal the evidences and try to avoid a trial? As at those times women were not accorded the opportunity to speak in the court, they would not be able to present their different reading of the case. Who would stand by Minnie Wright then?

The Hossack case is the ‘dark past’ where women were not given the chance to form the events — now Glaspell turns the situation upside down: she re-writes the story from the point of view of the (previously concealed) motive of the wife, and now women have the opportunity to shape the events.

So far we have seen that the main source of Susan Glaspell’s play had been an actual murder case she had covered as a reporter, and that she was deeply influenced by socialism and feminism. The source is thus given, the main influences are given, the question is how Susan Glaspell presents them in her play. In the following chapters we are going to see the concept of the ‘female sphere’ in details, and how Glaspell included it and other culturally learned, stereotypical gender differences in her play, finally whether her female characters behave according to these socially constructed roles.

2.1. Inside the "Female Sphere"

Susan Glaspell's play focuses on the themes of social boundaries, gender-based differences of perception and the question of truth versus justice. It also erases highly problematic questions about the appreciation of female (emotional) intelligence, the lack of respect and mistreatment of women, as well as those aspects of marriage concerning physical and emotional isolation and dependence.

In order to deal 'neutrally' with generalised concepts, such as social boundaries or gender based differences, one needs to determine the nature of the 'building blocks' of the analysis: I would like to emphasise that in my thesis paper I use stereotypes and stereotypical images to present a generalised scene of the 1900s, with hierarchically ordered spheres. These spheres are gender-based and "separate" according to Linda K. Kerber[7]: there is a world for women, an inner, small, airy 'bubble' of domesticity, where women are "engaged in nurturant activities, focused on children, and family dependents" (Kerber 161), and there is another world of men, containing the rest (including the power to control the women's sphere). Among other presuppositions, the metaphor of spheres, which describes women's part in culture, even has "…a psychological foundation …[that describes] bounded, interior spaces vs. outer spaces corresponding to the male and female principles in body construction" (Kerber 162)[8]. Thereby, — in this sense — separation and the concept of 'the proper sphere' of women seems well-founded, with additional 'proofs' from the long-lasting, subordinating traditions of the (Western and Eastern) cultures: "the separation of spheres was not limited to a single generation or a single civilization" (Kerber 171), there has always been a distinction between private and public, where "male

[7] Linda K. Kerber in her essay „Separate Spheres, Female Words, Women 's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History", written in 1988, explains how the concept of „female sphere" is presented in feminist writings from the 1850s to the1980s.
[8] Kerber refers to feminist discourses in the 1960s. Ibid.

space tends to fuse with public space, while what is left, is women's space" (Kerber 188). Consequently women's 'proper sphere' was regarded to be the private sphere, their home, separated (sometimes even physically) from the public sphere, and this "separation was generally associated with subordination, deteriorating status and the victimization of women by men" (Kerber 166). As a result of this subordination there emerged the image of stereotypical women, who was, amongst others, (but rather most importantly) obedient, since "the cardinal virtues associated with women was domesticity, piety, purity and submissiveness" (Kerber 163).

To summarize, hypothetically there is a gender-based and hierarchically structured world of spheres where the 'female sphere' is separated and subordinate. Consequently females have to be submissive, humbly stay in their proper sphere (domesticity), and manage only their inferior affairs, everything in connection with the domestic realm, which —from the 'male point of view' — are insignificant, trifling. At this point let me turn to Susan Glaspell's play, *Trifles*.

2.1.1. Men in "Womenland"

We are going to see how the concept of separate spheres works in the play of Susan Glaspell, and how it is presented textually. In *Trifles* the Sheriff, the County Attorney, Mr Hale, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters appear on the scene of the murder of John Wright. We learn that Minnie Wright, the wife, has been arrested, and while the men are searching for evidence against her, the women are left alone in the kitchen to gather some things that Mrs. Wright has asked to be taken into the prison for her. When they are gathering these items, the ladies unintentionally find clues for the motive of the murder in the kitchen.

In the play the concept of separate spheres is truly visible, not only in a theoretical, but also in the material sense. In a sense, the private (female) and public (male) duality is materialised in the actual house — the kitchen being the 'heart of the house', the private, stereotypically female sphere, where the female characters settle, while the other rooms represent a rather public sphere, which the male characters immediately conquer by going around the house, "snooping around" (1113) in search for clues. In the 21st century, when inviting informal guests, (and invitation evokes emotional reception), no matter how small the room is, people like gathering in the kitchen, for the very reason that it recalls the archetypal images connected to the female sphere: food stands for nurturing, sitting around the table evoke family gatherings, and the 'female energy', that permeates the space, liberates people from social restrictions, so they can freely speak about their emotions. The 'women's world' is much smaller than the 'men's world' in terms of both physical and mental expansion, and both group, the female and the male, keep the 'rules' of these separate spheres, they stay in their own territory: — so the ladies, as 'well-behaved submissive creatures' sit in the kitchen and chat about 'insignificant' things, while the men go round surveying the whole house and its surroundings. The conventional dichotomy of

the powerful (men) and the subordinate (women) is also at work, since the Sheriff, the County Attorney and Mr. Hale behave absolutely confident, being in a ‘superior position’, thus feel at home in the house, while the women act frightened and confused. Since this is a crime scene that needs to be investigated, a male prerogative, the male characters act confidently, as their stereotypical gender roles require, showing that they are in control of the situation. These roles are also texts encoded in our minds through socialization, which cultural constructs we take for granted as biological ‘truths’, — nevertheless such biological ‘truths’ are also cultural constructs, learned patterns. Consequently, acting superior and important, the men make a general inspection of the kitchen (in fact just look around) where the County Attorney is sure they will not find any significant pieces of evidence — for the men, the kitchen, being the subordinate women’s domain, is just a storehouse of unimportant things. They are “… convinced that there was nothing important here – nothing that would point to any motive” (1112), because there is “nothing here but kitchen things” (1112). They express their opinion in a half sentence: by declaring that they do not consider “kitchen things” important, they express their view about the kitchen and its ‘owner’, Minnie Wright, and consequently all women in general. For the men kitchens, and what they imply, the female sphere, have nothing to do with serious matters. So they go upstairs to examine the very room in which John Wright’s body has been found strangled. Meanwhile Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale are left alone in the kitchen, at their ‘proper place’. Thus establishing the ‘suitable’ places for women and men in the given space, let us turn to the characters’ interpretation of their own surroundings.

2.1.2. The Text of a Murderer — Different Perspectives, Different Perceptions

Susan Glaspell's play provides an illustrative example "just how gender-inflected our ability [is when it comes to reading] texts, one another, or the world at large" (Kolodny 587), how dissimilar perspectives women and men have, and how differently they perceive the same things, which is also culture-based and learned. First of all on a 'material level', they behave and act differently, as if being in two different worlds with different norms to live by both mentally and physically. In *Trifles* the gender difference is further emphasised by the stereotypical behaviour of the characters: the three men are the 'active males' — they go up, and down, go out and come back several times, 'going round their territory' in every dimension. They are energetic, they deliberately want to find clues, they are loud, dominant and self-confident from beginning to end, in spite of the fact that they cannot find anything — they represent everything that is considered to be masculine. On the other hand there is a feminine world, where Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are the typical representatives of the oppressed women of a male-governed society, they are the 'passive females' — they stay in the house (mostly in the kitchen), moving only a few steps around, they are confused, shy and they are just talking silently. They have no intention to find pieces of evidence whatsoever, and even when they find something at first they are reluctant to accept its importance.

However, within the given situation, the main stress is on the "crucial importance of the sex of the interpreter" (Kolodny 460) as the "female meaning" proves to be inaccessible to "male interpretation" (Kolodny fn. 25). In spite of the fact that "men control the public authority to read (or interpret) the world, … the male characters are incapable of

adequately "reading" even the women's closest to them, because what is significant to one sex, is no so to the other" (Kolodny 588). Upon entering the kitchen of Minnie Wright, a supposed murderer, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters are naturally frightened and confused, nevertheless they instantly feel and 'read' the meaning of the disorder in the kitchen both physically and mentally, where — though there are ample signs that something went terribly wrong there — the men have only noticed the mess. In interpreting a given situation, (stereotypically), men and women have different strategies, which "are learned, historically determined, and thereby necessarily gender-inflected" (Kolodny 456). Though, from a male perspective, the kitchen is just a messy room, it conveys 'worlds of meanings' to the female observer— there are many things that draw both party's attention, but only the women can interpret the implication of these details. They are faced with the signs of unfinished work: the preserves are frozen and broken, the towels are dirty, there are pans under the sink, a loaf of bread is set in a pan, another is laid beside the breadbox, the table is half messy – half wiped … — but these are meaningful parts of a "metaphysical, coded message" (Kolodny 462). This presumes that Minnie is communicating through these clues unintentionally, because only through this medium can she "tell" her story to other women — and exclusively to women, because "if the absent Minnie Wright is the "transmitter", or "sender" in this schema, then only the women are competent "receivers" or "readers" of her message, since they alone share not only her context (the supposed insignificance of kitchen things) but, as a result, the conceptual patterns, which make up her world" (Kolodny 462). Accordingly Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters step by step start to pick up bits of information Minnie Wright left —however unintentionally—, since "coding need not to be a conscious act… and Minnie Wright did not deliberately encode her murderous rage and despair into the chaos of her kitchen and sewing basket, but she nonetheless left a message

that the male investigators could not read correctly and their wives could not mis-read" (Radner and Lanser 415).

But their discussion is interrupted, the men arrive from upstairs. The Sheriff and his fellows only get the last sentence of their dialogue, in which Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale converse about the technique of Minnie Wright's quilting. They think the women are only chatting about quilting when they are at the scene of an actual murder, and their previous supposition seems well founded — women cannot have anything serious to talk about. So the Sheriff ironically mediates to his fellows that "they wonder whether if she was quilt it or just knot it" (*Trifles* 1115). However, this sentence proves to be particularly significant, the men do not recognise its importance, — for them it is just something to laugh at, the proof of women's idle thinking. Nevertheless, for the women this is a "entirely deliberate" coded message "with double entendres that only they can understand" (Radner and Lanser 415). This sentence, whether she "quilt it or knot it", is mentioned three times in the play, and its significance grows each time in parallel with the women's growing certainty about their own knowledge (1115, 1117, 1119).

As the men leave the two women alone in the kitchen again, Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale find more and more clues to what (and why) could have happened in the house. The kitchen becomes a storehouse of hidden emotions that only women can understand since "the signs common to women's experience can make up a complex text capable of many readings, that in such a text women can read esoteric messages that are not easily accessible to men, messages it would not be safe to express directly" (Radner and Lanser 413). It is the ability of empathy and compassion, the emotional observance, (again stereotypically saying), the one ability the men lack, which makes the ladies comprehend the meaning of the items they have found. Their investigation is moved forward not by factual pieces of evidence, fingerprints or smoking guns, but by their emotional response to

these factual evidences. The feelings that these objects evoke and the similar situations in their own lives to what these facts remind them are more important for their comprehension, than the actual objects. The women not only realize how the murder took place, but also the motives. They discover the birdcage and the dead canary, and finally they came to a conclusion based on the evidence men may think are foolish little things, which proves that "males [are] often inadequate readers where women are concerned" (Kolodny 463). The attitude spawning from their supposed superiority — that men are looking down on women thinking, proves to be a fatal drawback. Their lack of "familiarity with the women's imaginative universe, that universe within which their acts are signs" (Kolodny 463) prevents them from obtaining the truth. Making meaning is a cultural performance that is, in theory, shared by every human being, still "the men in these stories can neither read, nor comprehend the meanings of the women, and this is in spite of the apparent sharing of a common language" (Kolodny 463). In Saussurean terms women in *Trifles* render different signifieds to signifiers than men.[9] However the referent (the actual object) is the same, the signified (the mental concept) is different, consequently they deduce dissimilar meanings from the same referent. The process works in reverse order as well: what the three men in *Trifles* search for are 'real' clues of a murder case, but the actual referents of the signifieds are different for them, than to the women. The men's concept of murder differs from the women's concept. When they search for clues, they expect to find, for example, signs of violent action, broken windows, stolen goods, or a smoking gun, something that would fit into their stereotypical image of a murder, so "they spend their time trying to discover their own story they are familiar with, can recognize as a text, and know how to read" (Fetterley 148). They cannot enter into the women's world, even when they accuse a woman with murder, they still search for masculine evidences,

[9] See: Saussure 1972.

rather than accepting a fact that in this case they should have paid more attention to feminine matters. Their action entail the enactment of socially ascribed roles, from which they are unable to step out, because they "enter the situation bound by a set of powerful assumptions … with masculine subject and masculine point of view …[and] … cannot imagine the story behind the case" (Fetterley 147).

Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters reading the 'coded text' of Minnie Wright come to realise the clues and understand their symbolic meanings, they imagine the story behind the case. The play, besides suggesting a great emotional turmoil, presents different objects that can be interpreted symbolically, thus adding another – metaphysical — layer to the analysis, which the two women understand immediately. The canary and the birdcage, for example, can have several meanings. In one sense the bird may substitute the child Minnie could never have. Or it can symbolize the lost liveliness of Minnie, as Mrs. Hale says, that before her marriage "She— come to think of it, she was kind of like a bird herself — real sweet and pretty, but kind of timid and — fluttery" (1117). In this sense Minnie was a caged bird herself, she was confined to the house and could not communicate with others, that is to say John Wright with the bird killed Minnie's soul, too, as Mrs. Hale observes: "… No, Wright wouldn't like the bird — a thing that sang. She used to sing. He killed that, too." (1117). Besides the canary the jars of cherry preserves can have a symbolic meaning, too, the preserves that had been broken because of the cold weather, are in parallel with the life of Minnie Wright – her spirit, as sweet and lively as summer cherries, had been broken too, because of her cold and possessive husband. The preserves can also symbolize the hard work women have to do just to please their husbands, "She'll feel awful bad after all her hard work in the hot weather. I remember the afternoon I put up my cherries last summer" (1113), says Mrs. Hale. Making preserves is considered to be the duty of women while at the same time judged to be a mere trifle: the men in the play make fun of Mrs.

Wright for worrying for her preserves, “Can you beat that woman, held for murder and worrin' about her preserves” (1112). Or, from another point of view, the cherry preserves can symbolize the social state and the attitude of a woman: by trying to please the husband, being a good housewife she actually ‘preserves’ and ‘conserves’ the system she is rendered to.

Nonetheless, all these details have a definite significance in the understanding of the motives and circumstances of the murder, it is the quilt that has the most important role in the play. In this case the notion of incomplete work implies a disturbed mind, and the image of knotting the thread when quilting conveys the thought of knotting the rope around the husband’s neck. The quilt is also a metaphorical representation of the process of solving the mystery. Before a quilt is completed, it is just pieces of patches of fabric, until the pieces are put together they have nothing in common, just as the ‘trifles’ the two women gather in the kitchen. They ‘piece by piece’ realise the relationship between the bird, Minnie Wright, John Wright and strangling: “Mrs. Hale: …He killed that too. Mrs. Peters: (moving uneasily) We don’t know who killed the bird. Mrs. Hale: I knew John Wright. Mrs. Peters: It was an awful thing that was done in this house that night, Mrs. Hale. Killing a man while he slept, slipping a rope around his neck that choked the life out of him. Mrs. Hale: His neck. Choked the life out of him. (Her hand goes out and rests on the birdcage.)” (1118). They manage to put the pieces together, just as the log cabin pattern emerges from the quilt – this is why the key sentence of the play “We call it— knot it” (1119) is also related to quilting.

The three men returning from their vain quest for ‘real’ pieces of evidence reappear and remark upon the women’s trifling quest after the quilting technique. Evidently it is surely inconceivable for them that the women could possibly find any evidence, not to mention that they have already drawn their conclusion of the case. The County Attorney

poses the question about the quilting once again, but he does not even pretend to be seriously interested in the subject, he adds disdainfully, "Well, that's interesting, I'm sure" (1117), and one can imagine that he has not really heard Mrs. Peters' answer, not even his own question. It seems he only wants to be friendly with the women, to condescend to the women's level, he does not even try to make up something informative to ask. He just wants to kill time between two 'rounds' of inquest, his question is rather a loud monologue, when it does not really matter whether there is actually another human being to whom he is speaking . To draw a 21st century parallel this is the same situation when one (his head full of thoughts) gets on the tube just for one station and accidentally bumps into an acquaintance. To seem polite we usually ask an unimportant question, and although we do not care about the answer at all, because (rather self-importantly) we are already thinking about our next thing to do, we listen to the answer, smile, say goodbye and get off at the next station. If, in the next moment, somebody would ask us what question we posed and what the answer was, presumably we could not tell. This is what the County Attorney does in the play. Seeing the birdcage he inquires about the bird, but not suspecting the least that he has actually bumped into the most important clue.

First the ladies are desperate because they do not know what to answer — they reckon their answer is important. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters for a moment forget their 'secondary status', — what would happen if the Sheriff found out about the bird? Probably nothing at all. Would he take it seriously? Not very likely. Maybe he would not understand the hidden message, or he would not think it important, or he might not even listen to it, but finally the Sheriff would dismiss it as a woman's dim and irrelevant idea. As Mrs. Peters points out "…My, it's a good thing the men couldn't hear us. Wouldn't they just laugh! Getting stirred up over a little thing like a — dead canary. As if that could have anything to do with — with — wouldn't they laugh!" (1119). For the men this is

insignificant, this is inside the female sphere, not worth dealing with, there is not the slightest chance that the men would take women seriously. They are sure that women lack the intellect men have, they think that women are masters of nothing else but kitchen things or childcare ― naturally, only with male control. They do not assume that Mrs. Peters or Mrs. Hale is able to think or do anything that rises to the importance of 'their murder case'. The evidence lies in front of their eyes, still, because full of disdain towards the ladies the County Attorney does not even take the trouble to look properly at the items the two women are taking into the prison, just laughs "Oh, I guess they're not very dangerous things the ladies have picked up" (1119). It is not at all surprising that they think they are being witty when they make fun at the ladies' expense recalling 'the mysterious case of the quilting' the third time: "Well, Henry, at least we found out that she was not going to quilt it. She was going to — what is it you call it, ladies!" to what Mrs. Hale answers "(Her hands against her pocket.) We call it ― knot it, Mr. .Henderson." (1119). It is painstakingly ironic, that the men would never dream that this sentence carries meaning, that it is one of the coding strategies[10] women (and people in general) use: a metaphor, "trivialization", saying something "that is considered by the dominant culture to be unimportant, innocuous, or irrelevant", [which is], "identified by some linguist, as characteristic of "women's language" or "language of the powerless"." (Radner and Lanser 420). Language usually reflects on the hierarchies commonly found within human society, especially in social relationships. These hierarchies categorize both women and men, lock them up in stereotypes, and — reflecting on the Greek, original meaning 'hieros arkhos': 'sacred rule'― seem to be unalterable. Hierarchy is often viewed as necessary in marital relationships, too, and it is visibly present in *Trifles*. The language the Sherriff and his fellows use, the way they behave, and the words they use describing their wives, like

[10] According to Radner and Lanser the coding stategies are appropriation, juxaposition, distraction, indirection, trivialization, and incompetence. (Radner and Lanser 412)

"women are used to worrying about trifles" (1112) are all rooted in men's traditional oppression of women supported by hierarchical constructions.

The 'trifles', all those experiences that women have in common, are incomprehensible for the men, and that makes male and female observation so different. Stereotypical men tend to overlook such 'trifles' as emotions, just as John Wright ignored the feelings and emotional needs of her wife. The Sheriff and his fellows look for sound evidences, facts, objects, and actions, anything that is material and logical, while the women approach from an emotional point of view. Stereotypically saying, — as lot of differences between the sexes are based on socially constructed gender identities, rather than on biological sex differences, — women are more capable of grabbing the immaterial, the illogical or the mystical. Women sympathize and identify with, feel and care for others, imagine how they would feel in a similar situation, remember to similar situations from their own lives. As a learned, conventionally accepted cultural concept, the female 'key word' is thus compassion, while the male 'key word' is dry observation — observation from the outside. These two perspectives are the two furthest points of the same scale of understanding. Both women and men strive for understanding. There is no 'good' or 'bad' perspective though, just perspectives in general, deeply influenced by traditional stereotypes, social upbringing, just as the actual year we live in, the actual laws, customs, and traditions, or the society we exist in. These stereotypes frame our whole life. Thus in the play when the women pick up on the emotional aspects of the items and their significance to Minnie Wright, and the men are only looking for obvious evidences they simply act as their stereotyped role dictate.

So far we have observed that the interpretation of the sings as a text is closely related to the sex of the interpreter, to separate spheres, which evoke the concept of stereotypical, gendered perspectives. We have seen, that the interpretation of 'trifles' and

the differences in observing strategies are also influenced by these culturally accepted gender roles. Now we are going to examine what is the relationship between justice and morality in *Trifles*, and whether it is connected to the notion of separate spheres as well.

2.1.3. Justice Reconsidered

Murder is a sin — no doubt.

But do we, readers, really think Minnie Wright is a wicked criminal? Can we condemn her? Can we feel pity for the victim and anger for the murderer? Or the murderer is a victim, too?

How can a murder be justified?

Though it is rather possible that the men may never realise the significance of the dead canary, the quilting, and the other things they have discovered, finally Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters decide to conceal the incriminating pieces of evidence. Thus only one question remained.

Why?

At the end of the play we have sympathy for Mrs. Wright, though she actually killed her husband, and support the other women who try to help her by hiding evidences — that is in fact abetment in crime — "their decision is presented as the right decision, even though it is understood to go clearly against conventional law" (Stephens 52). But why do Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters conceal the pieces of evidence? They probably have a complex reason: first of all because of compassion. Secondly because they fear, that Mrs. Wright might not get a fair trial in front of a jury composed only of men. Thirdly, for their, (especially for Mrs. Hale's), own guilty conscience, because of not visiting Minnie Wright frequently. And last but not least they might wish to strike back to the men, to control a situation in a world dominated by men, to — though secretly — display some power over

them, for which decision the "further support … is created through the portrayal of the condescending attitude of the two men" (Stephens 53). The pattern is visible, the 'quilting of the story' is finished, still it cannot be exhibited, the women have to remain silent to reach their aim. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters solved the mystery, they could have shown their husbands, but for the sake of Minnie Wright they endure still being looked down on. "Compensation and recuperation", a dual mechanism reigns over the events: "the women's moral superiority enables them to go against or subvert conventional law, and still be "right" ... [but]… "women's law" is pitted against "men's law", and thus the play perpetuates the idea of separate spheres. By finding and concealing the incriminating evidence, the women win their own individual victory, but the system remains intact" (Stephens 53).

In a society as theirs, where women had to behave according to men's rules, otherwise they might become castaways, there is not much in what women can be different from each other. The concept of the separate spheres is so deeply rooted (unconsciously) in their attitudes, that a lot of women thought of their troubles as natural and inevitable, because they did not perceive the system or the language unjust, illogical and culturally determined. They accepted their inferiority as a biological axiom, since there are many over-changing hypotheses to justify inequality and perpetuate stereotypes. Losses are the same, joys and sorrows are the same ― admittedly not only for Mrs. Peters, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Wright but also for every 'Mrs.' in every era. Besides realising that their emotions are the same, the ladies have to notice other similarities as well: when the attorney's makes an observation about the kitchen towel being dirty, Mrs. Hale replies that "Men's hands aren't always as clean as they might be." (1112). Innocent as it may seem, her remark has a bitter undertone about men in general. Men who consider themselves superior in many senses, who like to think their actions are always just and perfect, are in fact quite fallible

and guilty in many things. No matter how much they might flatter themselves advertising their own virtues and morals, being a Sheriff never means automatically being infallibility personified. Moreover, the 'world of women' and the 'world of men' have different norms and standards to judge by. In consequence a man who is regarded as 'a good man' by the patriarchal society he lives in, is not necessarily a good man in a woman's eyes — just as in the case of John Hossack, who, according to the reports of Glaspell and the research done by Linda Ben-Zvi, was a highly respected member of the society, even though he frequently beat his wife and children.

As the additional information suggests, the 'good' (hard working and non-drinker) John Wright was a cold and controlling man, absolutely different from the joyful Minnie Wright. After they got married John Wright started to resent Minnie Wright's cheerfulness and controlled her every step. Minnie Wright had no choice, — a woman had no rights outside marriage and not much in marriage— she turned into Mrs. Wright, and resigned to an unhappy marriage. When they are left alone in her kitchen the two women start to talk about Minnie Wright. Only when they recall her life do they realize their own status by the help of the similarities, and they draw the events of her life in parallel with their own. First it is Mrs. Peters who gets closer to Minnie Wright's feelings, when the women find the dead canary, and Mrs. Peters recalls the death of her own childhood pet, and her own capacity of violence: "When I was a girl — my kitten — there was a boy took a hatchet, and before my eyes, — and before I could get there — (Covers her face an instant.) If they hadn't held my back, I would have — (Catches herself, looks upstairs, where the steps are heard, falters weakly.) — hurt him." (1118). Then, when Mrs. Peters, evoking the silence after her lost child, becomes aware that the silence she had is the same silence Minnie Wright had — that all women share the same experiences, that they "… all go through the same things — it's all just a different kind of the same thing." (1118).

Reading the text of Minnie Wright the two women imagine her particular story. Living with a cold, silent husband, who will not let her wife communicate with others, (not even through a telephone) must have been really difficult for a cheerful woman like Minnie Wright. For years she endured this subordinate, emotionally murderous state, and possibly has never rebelled against her husband's will. But when she bought the canary, she revolted against the tyrannical control of John Wright, what he could not endure. The canary was able to bring some happiness into Minnie's life, the very thing John Wright was unable to do, and realising his failure might have made him even more bitter and cold. One would imagine that the anger caused by his own incapability of happiness, and the noise the canary made that irritated him so much, might lead to a violent quarrel, when John Wright killed the bird. However the story does not say whether Minnie has actually witnessed the strangling of her canary or not, the death of her beloved bird waked Minnie Wright from her nightmare of an unhappy wife, only to enter into another reverie.

As a result of this sudden traumatic event (added to the long-term exposure to the emotional abuse of her husband), she suffered a psychological trauma. When something terrible happens to us suddenly time seems to stop. The physical world, our surrounding becomes a queer setting, everything seems surreal. This altered state of consciousness is a passive response to a trauma, often characterized by an emotional numbness, when clear thinking may be difficult or impossible. Values get lost, our everyday routine loses its significance, feelings and thoughts cease to exist, what remains is nothing else but silence and non-existence. Dissociating from the painful emotion includes numbing all emotion, and the person may seem confused in ordinary situations, emotionally flat, preoccupied or distant, as Mr. Hale noted about Minnie Wright "she looked queer…as if she didn't know what she was going to do next" (1111)[11]. Without the last straw that connected her to an

[11] For the psychological description see: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Psychological_trauma.

emotional life, the canary, she became a lifeless, mechanic shadow of a woman. In this trance-like state she puts the bird in a beautiful box, maybe to bury it or just to keep it close, and absolutely ignores her domestic duties — the kitchen is left with unfinished work, frozen in time. In some cases, a person can re-experience the traumatic event — I think that in Minnie Wright's case the strangling of the canary was so deeply carved in her mind, that it was rather 'necessary' to kill his husband in the same way. The day he killed the canary determined the fate of John Wright, although I think when she killed him, Minnie Wright was not acting out of pain, or anger. I do not think she was feeling anything when she strangled her husband. She was still in trance, or maybe had another traumatic experience, because in some cases even a person's own actions can be traumatic, if the offender feels helpless to control the urge to commit such a crime. Maybe Minnie Wright obeyed his internal urge, because she no more had the strength to resist. But as far as I am concerned, I do not think she actually understood what she did; since after she killed John Wright she did not try to escape, just sat in her rocking chair "rocking back and forth, [and] she had her apron in her hand and was kind of — pleating it" (1111) just to keep moving, but otherwise doing absolutely nothing. Whatever the true explanation of her behaviour is, the reader might feel that she is not strictly responsible for her act, being in a rather overturned mental state.[12]

Mrs. Hale or Mrs. Peters realise that they are alike Minnie Wright, only born to be slightly luckier. Being in the same female sphere, they share a common fate, and this sense of community gives them courage to oppose traditional, conceptual law, and follow their own, 'female law'. From the point of view of the abused housewife the murder can be justified. Conventionally as women and men have very different perspectives, the way they

[12] For the results of recent psychological researches appearing in this paragraph see Tedeschi and Calhoun.

handle information is also dissimilar, just as their concept of morality and justice. There are not only two ways of understanding a story but also two ways of understanding justice as well — "Women have a certain knowledge or wisdom that men do not want or value. By their decision, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters disrupt or subvert conventional law, but they maintain the image of moral leaders by adhering to an alternate or "higher" moral code" (Stephens 53). In the case of Minnie Wright law is one thing, and justice is another — Minnie Wright murdered her husband, which was a crime, but John Wright systematically and slowly 'murdered' Minnie Wright, and "That was a crime! Who's going to punish that?" (1118). Law is never equal with justice or with morals, but it is a traditionally accepted language, that reflects on power relations and social structures. In addition, as 'public and private' duality can be identified with 'men and women', thus 'law and morality (justice)' can be identified the same way with the different sexes. Law represents the powerful public authority, governed by men, its decisions based upon facts, while morality is the immaterial, private 'forum' for women, inside the female sphere, where decisions are made according to emotional arguments. The male dominance of the law, the courtrooms and trials was such a powerful stereotype, that there is no wonder 'the other side' of the scale, morality became identified with females, even in the theatre. "Nineteenth-century middle-class ideology constructed an image of Women as a morally superior being especially suited for protecting her (female) domestic sphere… (this view and the additional) … idea that drama should present a moral view of life remained a basic tenet… (consequently) dictated (that in a dramatic play like *Trifles*) the most moral or right decision must be made by the female." (Stephens 46, 48). Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, thus, in the name of moral justice, choose to abide conceptual law, and hide the incriminating evidence. By saving a particular woman, they — though just in theory — administered justice to every abused housewife, and even strengthen their own 'community feeling'.

The question arises nevertheless, whether with this act they ‘crossed the borders’ of the female sphere or not? In one sense they did: they opposed the stereotypical social order, subverted the law, and they were disloyal to their husbands, (mostly Mrs. Peters, who is the sheriff’s wife). But in another sense they did not: they stayed in their own territory, whatever happened, it took place in the kitchen, their own domain, with ‘kitchen things’ and quilting, that are all their own ‘trifles’, they judged according to their own justice. However morally questionable their concealing pieces of evidences is, (in a rather artificial sense) it is still compatible with archetypal femininity — to turn past male ideologists’ own weapon against themselves — “…bounded, interior spaces vs. outer spaces corresponding to the male and female principles in body construction” (Kerber 162). Consequently if bounded, interior spaces belong to women, and hiding, covering something, even a dead canary, evokes the concept of including, containing something in an internal space, then the whole matter remains inside the ‘female sphere’.

We have already seen that the concepts of justice and morality have a gendered undertone, and that higher morality, presented by the heroines of Glaspell, can win over patriarchal law. So far we have connected three concepts to the female sphere: the appreciation of ‘trifles’, different methods of interpreting a text, and finally the preference of morality to law. At this point let me turn to the description of female detective characters, and how Glaspell’s inheritance appears in detective fiction, especially in the works of Agatha Christie and Wilkie Collins.

3. The Trifles of Female Detectives

If we think of contemporary, 21st century crime cases, we might hear that a murderer was arrested because of a forensic evidence, like the DNA analysis of a single hair, or a drop of blood, or the print of their car's tyre, or because he or she appeared on video recording of a surveillance camera. When the case is solved, it is always a tiny detail, on which the murderer slips, and ends up in prison. Methods of investigation are rather different though, and it is the same in the case of crime stories, too. No matter what crime stories we read, let just consider the classics of this genre, as a 'basic rule' it can be stated, that famous fictional detectives, such as Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple, Sherlock Holmes, or Maigret usually solve the mysteries with the help of seemingly unimportant things, which finally always betray the criminals, although these detectives have definitely different attitudes and investigating methods. Sherlock Holmes and Maigret, for example, besides their logical genius, often apply other techniques such as disguising themselves, or even use their physical strength in chasing criminals around the town. Female or effeminised detectives, however, can only depend on their intellect, or — when masculine force is needed — on the assistance of the police. This is particularly true of the fictional detectives of the 1900s, whose character is still determined by the concept of the 'female sphere', thus their methods can include only stereotypically feminine strategies, the ones Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters used in Trifles, such as 'chatting about unimportant things', or having an emotional reading of a given situation. In addition, these novels are usually set in a domestic environment, providing the best circumstances for the female or effeminised detective to use their specialised talent in ferreting out truth.

For my subsequent analysis, I have chosen the works of Agatha Christie and Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* to illustrate how and what feminine strategies female or effeminised detectives use in their investigations. By 'effeminized' I mean a male character who has both feminine and masculine characteristics, (or even more feminine than masculine), and thus he is considered to be an eccentric dweller of the no man's land between the female and the male sphere. Even so, I would like to emphasize it again, that what we are dealing with are stereotypes and socially constructed gender roles. In the previous chapters we have seen that some features are associated exclusively with feminine characters. These features are: first, a different attitude to (seemingly unimportant) clues; second, an alternative method for interpreting a given situation and/or clues; and third, a critical interpretation of law. In the following we are going to examine how these 'rules' are presented in Christie's and Collins' works.

3.1. 'The Case of the Molehill': Trifles in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*

Wilkie Collins' *The Moonstone* is considered to be the "first English detective fiction" (T.S.Eliot)[13]. It may seem strange, though, to cite a detective novel with no female detectives into a discussion where my aim is to connect female characters and 'trifles', but one of the most important sentences about the importance of 'trifles' can be found in this novel, told by who else but a man. This man, detective Sergeant Cuff, in addition, is obsessed by 'trifles' and has genuinely feminine characteristics, for example his favourite hobby is tending roses, and his gentle nature becomes obvious, when he is described as looking more like a parson than a detective (99-100). The feminine side of his character, his ability for empathy, his gendered perception, and his tendency to stick to details enables him to have a more complex view of certain situations and about the environment where the events took place, than if he were 'fully masculine'. He is the typical 'effeminised detective', just like Hercule Poirot: he does not have a masculine look, does not have broad shoulders or huge muscles, his appearance is gentle, his clothes are chosen with great care. Sergeant Cuff's speech is always eloquent, his manners are perfect, but he is also vain, and tends to interpret clues and justice as critically as women (according to stereotypical rules, as described in the previous chapters). He does not get upset if he has to

[13] Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) was an English novelist who worked in the mainstream of Victorian domestic and social fiction and had a long friendship with Charles Dickens. He studied to be a lawyer, but never practiced law rather put his legal knowledge to work in crime writing. His works include the enormously popular suspense thriller *Woman in White* and *The Moonstone* (1868*)* the first English detective novel. In *The Moonstone* Collins created Sergeant Cuff, the prototype of the detective hero in English fiction, whose numerous traits would turn up in detective stories for generations to come. In *The Moonstone* Sergeant Cuff interviews people at a country house to discover who stole a huge diamond that has a violent history. The plot includes also somnambulism and experiments with opium, Oriental magic, and three mysterious Hindus. The story unfolds through the words of its various characters. T.S. Eliot described *The Moonstone* as "the first, the longest, and the best of modern English detective novels". *The Moonstone* may be regarded as the model for later crime story writers, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle or John Dickson Carr. Although suffering from spells of severe illness, Collins continued to write continually even in his final years, but unfortunately besides the popularity of Charles Dickens, the popularity of his works declined. (Collins 3 (Preface)). (Martin 503).

enter the domestic realm of women, he likes ‘chatting’ with people, and he immediately notices seemingly useless details, like a smudge on a painted door, from what he draws his conclusions. His detailed examination, “the detective’s super vision is dramatized by being exercised on what would seem to resist it most: the ordinary, “trivial” facts of everyday life” (Miller 154). This supervision means a special insight, since he is present in the crime case, and by exhaustive examination he gains an insight into the situation; but he is not deeply involved in it (as for example the murder, the victim or the suspects), so he is able to observe the situation from an outsider’s point of view. Moreover, he is not only fully conscious of his intuitive way of finding clues, but he also defines this instinct to be a logical and exclusively expedient stratagem — when the incompetent local investigator Superintendent Seegrave dismisses one of his clues (the smudge on the door) as a trifle, Sergeant Cuff responds to him with powerful confidence:

> — ‘I can’t change my memory, Sergeant,’ he (Superintendent Seegrave) said, ‘a mere trifle – a mere trifle.’
>
> Sergeant Cuff looked at Mr. Seegrave as he looked at the first taste of his quality which he had had yet.
>
> ‘— In all my experience along the dirtiest ways of this dirty little world, I have never met with such a thing as a trifle yet. (102)

In a sense, since male observance and female observance are both stereotypical constructions, in this short dialogue Superintendent Seegrave acts as the ‘prototype’ of ‘male observance’, considering only evident things, while Sergeant Cuff plays the role of the ‘female observer’, who cares for smaller details, too. From a conventional and simplified point of view the differences between the two types of observation can be

reduced to basic binary oppositions such as big clues versus small clues, dry logic versus emotions, law versus morals or average versus eccentric. For instance (to illustrate the average versus eccentric opposition) Superintendent Seegrave is described as an average man, while Sergeant Cuff definitely has something 'plus' in his personality, so "by making Sergeant Cuff a lover of roses, Collins endowed him with a touch of eccentricity which has since become a conventional trait in many fictional detectives." (Ashley 52). Having such contrasted characteristics, it is no wonder that the two policemen do not like each other at all — and this repulsive behaviour can be observed in the case of Hercule Poirot, too, who is not only eccentric, but also a foreigner. If we stick to stereotypes, 'masculine men' usually dislike those men, who have both masculine and feminine character traits. People tend to have an aversion to those whom they cannot understand, and —in terms of power relations— having feminine characteristics, — and thus, from a masculine point of view, being weaker, — always implies disparagement, "for we live in a world in which authority has traditionally validated itself by its distance from the feminine and from what is understood to be effeminate" (Kerber 198). These eccentric detective characters represent the continuum between the extremes: they are outsiders in the territory of conventional gender spheres; they dwell in the no man's land in-between. Thus the systems of significations that they represent are incomprehensible and subversive because they are out of the culturally accepted framework, yet this quality grants them the supervision, the special insight.

This is why the Superintendent looks down on the pieces of evidence the Sergeant finds, and at one occasion when Sergeant Cuff concludes three important ideas out of that smudge on the door, the irritated Superintendent Seegrave remarks "There ***is*** such a thing, Sergeant, as making a mountain out of a molehill. Good morning." Fortunately Sergeant Cuff has a witty sentence to strike back: "There is also such a thing as making nothing out

of a molehill, in consequence of your head being too high to see it." (107). And this is the very sentence I referred to as being the most important in connection with the importance of 'trifles'. If someone regards himself as being superior, he might walk by important things claiming that these belong to a supposedly inferior sphere, or pass by without even noticing their existence, because for him these clues (in the Saussurian sense) do not function as a sign system, and cannot be read as a text. This is a reproach to everybody who looks down on 'trifles' — just as it happens in Susan Glaspell's play: the Sheriff and his fellows never valued the 'molehills' of their wives, they regarded female affairs as being insignificant, because their head was also too high to see a women's point. Consequently we returned to the 'female sphere' again — Sergeant Cuff in the novel is an effeminised character, and for this reason he belongs to the 'female sphere'. In this sense, the detective, no matter whether he is genetically male or female, if his behaviour (his investigation method) is feminine, he moves out from the male role and approaches the female role. Still, he is equal with none of them, a heterogeneous being, thus he gets struck in the continuum between the stereotypical male and female spheres. The effeminized detective thus becomes a multi-perspectival observer, because he contests, destabilizes and, at the same time, appropriates gender roles as a performance. Nevertheless, he is an outsider in the male sphere, so male characters will not have proper regard for him, and as a result they will look down on his clues, his methods and disdain his intellect.

The Moonstone is therefore the "first English detective fiction" (T.S.Eliot)[14], not only because it created the main outlines of the developing genre, but also because the problematic status of the character of Sergeant Cuff forecast the presuppositions a detective such as Hercule Poirot will have to face.

[14] (Collins 3. (Preface)).

3.2. Women Solving Mysteries: Jane, Tuppence and … Hercule?

Feminine Methods, Clues and 'Justices' in the Works of Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie, the 'mother' of Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, the author of seventy-six detective stories, all-time best-selling author, had all the success a female writer could make.[15] Similarly to the play of Susan Glaspell, her crime stories can usually be analysed as 'domestic dramas', with a restricted group of knowable suspects at domestic scenes, places conventionally demarcated as feminine. Short cut nails, a tree drawn to a pavilion table, or the name of the ship on a painting, are all characteristic clues to be decoded by a detective alert to gendered spheres. Besides presenting 'wholly female' detectives, such as Miss Marple or Tuppence Beresford, she introduced Hercule Poirot, who has an 'eccentric' position and "defend[s] the domestic without properly belonging to it" (Rushing 97). Poirot's position is eccentric in the same way as Sergeant Cuff's in *The Moonstone*, he is also an outsider who dwells in the continuum between the stereotypically separated spheres, but who has a special insight, too. Poirot does not belong properly to the domestic, since he is not a woman, nevertheless because of his feminine characteristics and supervision he is able to understand female signs and read female texts. What Poirot, Miss Marple and Tuppence Beresford have in common is that, in one way or another, they all belong to or closely connected to the 'female sphere'. Consequently they value clues the same way as the heroines of Susan Glaspell, they understand the meanings of the pieces of evidence in the same feminine way, they have a critical view about truth and

[15] Agatha Christie, (1890-1976) was born in Torquay, Devon, in England. First she started to write romances under the name of Mary Westmacott, and after began her series of crime stories, with the characters of the famous Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. She has married twice, first to Colonel Archibald Christie, then to Sir Max Mallowan, an archaeologist, whom she accompanied to his excavations in the Middle East. In 1971 she was granted the title of Dame Commander of the British Empire. Her novels include among many others the *Murder on the Orient Express* and *Sleeping Murder.*

justice, and they are regularly looked down on, just as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in *Trifles*. Nonetheless I would like to emphasise it again, that these are culturally acquired modes of behaviour, not biological necessities. In addition, Agatha Christie's detectives, because being aware of it, can play with their own role, use or abuse it sometimes. Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters however, cannot, because they have just discovered their closed system of gender roles.

3.2.1. Feminine 'Methods' – Conversation, Observation and Intuition

In the following I would like to illustrate the feminine detecting methods as represented by Agatha Christie, especially those of Miss Marple, Tuppence Beresford and Hercule Poirot. These methods are very similar to those of Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in *Trifles*, based on conversation, observation, and intuition. Nevertheless each detective character has a 'special feature': Miss Marple prefers conversation and observation, Tuppence Beresford almost exclusively leans on her intuitions, while Hercule Poirot frequently mentions the use of his grey cells, his strict logic.

Though undoubtedly not the first, definitely the most famous female detective is Agatha Christie's Miss Marple.[16] She appears in twelve novels and in twenty short stories.[17] She is very much the stereotypical spinster of the last century — blue-eyed and frail, wearing pastel coloured clothes. Miss Marple is a shrewd and intelligent woman and a keen observer of human nature. She is able to solve difficult crimes not only because of her intelligence, but because her home village St. Mary Meade, over her lifetime, provided all kinds of crimes to observe, and thus "in the course of her duties in a country parish, Jane Marple has acquired quite a comprehensive knowledge of the facts of rural life. She

[16] Miss Marple was not the first female detective, but she is the one everyone thinks when the concept arises. The honour belonged to Anna Katherine Green's Amelia Butterworth. Anna Katherine Green (1846 –1935) was an American poet and novelist, who in her novel *That Affair Next Door* (1897) introduced Miss Amelia Butterworth, mystery fiction's original spinster sleuth. The gradually uncovering of hidden facts about a crime, and the character of the spinster sleuth (though Miss Amelia is in fact lesbian, with a rather masculine personality) inspired other writers, such as Agatha Christie as she records it in her autobiography. Green's other character is Violet Strange, who is a professional detective, taking on cases for clients. Among others, besides Agatha Christie, another of Green's follower is Mary Robert Rinehart who also wrote about spinster sleuths— her characters include Miss Rachel Innes, or the nurse-detective Miss Pinkerton. (Grost)

[17] Miss Marple novels are: The Murder at the Vicarage (1930) ,The Body in the Library (1942), The Moving Finger (1943), A Murder is Announced (1950), They Do It with Mirrors (1952), A Pocket Full of Rye (1953), 4.50 from Paddington (1957), The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side (1962), A Caribbean Mystery (1964), At Bertram's Hotel (1965), Nemesis (1971), Sleeping Murder (written around 1940, published 1976). Miss Marple short stories collections: *The Thirteen Problems*, *Miss Marple's Final Cases and Two Other Stories*, *Three Blind Mice*.

had no urge to talk about them, far less to write about them – but she knew them." (*A Caribbean Mystery* 9). She has a nephew, Raymond West, the writer who „… had once compared life in St. Mary Mead to scum on a pond, and she indignantly pointed out that smeared on a slide under the microscope there would be plenty of life to be observed." (*A Caribbean Mystery* 11). No crime can arise without reminding Miss Marple of some parallel incident in the history of her time, she believes that all people are alike everywhere, even though some people might disagree: "I must say,' said Sir Henry ruefully, 'that I dislike the way you reduce us all to a General Common Denominator.' Miss Marple shook her head sadly. 'Human nature is very much the same anywhere, Sir Henry" (*The Body in the Library* 134). She knows that people usually do not see the ways of the world as critically as she does, but because of her experiences she is able to see through the most complicated spiderwebs. Her supervision as insight helped her to create the "General Common Denominator": in her case it is not mere intuition that raises uncomfortable feelings in her, but she observes the appearance of a pattern, a type (even archetype) of a crime she has seen before, the system and its regularities:

> 'Woman's intuition, I suppose, he said sceptically. 'No, she doesn't call it that. Specialized knowledge is her claim.'
>
> 'And what does that mean?'
>
> 'Well, you know, Jefferson, we use it in police work. We get a burglary and we usually know pretty well who did it – of the regular crowd, that is. We know the sort of burglar who acts in a particular sort of way. Miss Marple has an interesting, though occasionally trivial, series of parallels from village life.'
>
> (*The Body in the Library* 127)

As even the most complex shapes can be divided into, and reduced to simple squares and triangles, or the most complicated recipes into base ingredients, Miss Marple with the help of her 'crime-recipes' can analyse and identify every single element of the given situation. Her female intuition is present only when she realizes the possible elements of a crime pattern, and she has a bad feeling about the potential crime. If her bad feeling proves to be correct, — in order to solve the mystery — she only needs to combine her observations and knowledge of people with the actual evidences, which is just the same recipe with a slightly different seasoning.

The elderly country lady unravels the mysteries only by the means of listening and chatting, as "she had one weapon and one weapon only, and that was conversation. Old ladies were given to a good deal of rambling conversation. People were bored by this, but certainly did not suspect them of ulterior motives" (*A Caribbean Mystery* 48) It is possible because of her posture as an old, unmarried country lady. This gives her a passport into conversations, because —stereotypically— she is pure and innocent, the one who has nothing to do with sins and crimes. She seems to be a harmless old lady who has a preference for trifles, as she says „…although of course it's quite unimportant really. But you see, it's important to me. And I hope you will understand and not think what I am asking is tiresome or – or unpardonable in any way" (*A Caribbean Mystery* 41). She has an enormous skill in listening and speaking, and she can easily manipulate the discussions to turn to the topic she is interested in — by actually living up to the Kerberian concept of female sphere: "Dr Graham…exerted himself to divert her mind from the loss of the snapshot, by conversing easily…He hardly knew himself how the conversation drifted back to Major Palgrave's decease." (*A Caribbean Mystery* 42).

Miss Marple is absolutely conscientious of the drawbacks of being 'just' an old lady, the fact that men would never take her comments on 'trifles' seriously, that they "… know what these elderly ladies are like. They magnify some small detail and work the whole thing up" (*A Caribbean Mystery* 83). She realizes it, — as both Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters knew it perfectly well in Susan Glaspell's play — but Miss Marple finds a solution to this problem: she always seeks for assistance, someone who still believes her, and who is respectful enough to be listened to:

> 'They would say more to you,' pointed out Miss Marple, 'than they would say to me.'… 'You've got to stop it, Mr. Rafiel.'
> 'Me?' said Mr. Rafiel, astonished, 'why me?'
> 'Because you're rich and important,' said Miss Marple, simply. 'People will take notice of what you say or suggest. They wouldn't listen to me for a moment. They would say that I was an old lady imagining things.'
> (A *Caribbean Mystery* 129, 139)

At least Miss Marple — contrary to the victorious, but silent ladies in *Trifles* — at the end of the Agatha Christie novels always gets the appreciation she deserves. Though not always in the most polite manner, certain characters praise her abilities "…Actually, you've got a logical mind. Very few women have" (*A Caribbean Mystery* 139). Nevertheless, she never gets offended, because she knows well if she does not want to end up 'castaway', she has to get accustomed to the rules of the patriarchal society she lives in. Her power lies in her accepting and at the same time 'abusing' her role: she tries to get the best out of her being looked down on. Similarly to the women 'pre-detectives' of Susan Glaspell, Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters, she seemingly surrenders and swallows her pride, put

aside the remarks in order to reach her goals, to serve justice. Because she is looked down on, nobody expects her to be able to do anything, so she can make arrangements without being disturbed. She is not taken seriously, and not considered to be dangerous, and this is where irony lies: this is the very thing why she is so dangerous for the murderers. Nobody really knows what is going on in her head: "She took out her knitting and the needles clicked rapidly as though they were trying to match the speed of her thoughts" (*A Caribbean Mystery* 33), for an outsider, she is just an old lady knitting, emerged maybe in her memories. She keeps up appearances, for the outside she plays her stereotypical role, only unmasking herself when her interruption is desperately needed, for example, to stop a murderer. Nevertheless, she always waits until the last moment, since unmasking herself deprives her from the great advantage of being an 'invisible' observer, the innocent and harmless old lady.

Admittedly, there are huge differences between Miss Marple and the ladies in *Trifles*. Miss Marple, contrary to Mrs. Peters and Mrs. Hale, when she unravels the mysteries she is faced with, presents them publicly. Thus, as her life goes on, she is getting more and more acknowledged. Because she has solved crimes in St. Mary Meade, Miss Marple becomes quite famous, so when something happens in the local surroundings, her opinion is required by several individuals or policemen who know her well, for example in *The Body in the Library*: "'That,' she murmured, 'is what makes it so very interesting.'/ 'Come now, Miss Marple,' said Colonel Melchett good humouredly, 'haven't you got an explanation?'/ 'Oh yes, I've got an explanation,' said Miss Marple. 'Quite a feasible one. But of course it's only my own idea." (*The Body in the Library,* 65). Many hang on to her opinion, but for those characters, who do not know her 'village-parallel finding' methods and crime patterns, Miss Marple seems to be an old lunatic when she suddenly comes up with one of her stories of the village life: "Tommy Bond,' she continued,' and Mrs Martin,

our new schoolmistress. She went to wind up the clock and a frog jumped out.' Josephine Turner looked puzzled. As they all went out of the room she murmured to Mrs Bantry: 'Is the old lady a bit funny in the head?'" (*The Body in the Library* 66). These seemingly odd parallels, nonetheless, helps her ferret out justice, when she combines them with the actual situations, and the clues she finds.

Besides Miss Marple, Agatha Christie has other female detectives as well, though not as famous as the one already mentioned. Tommy and Tuppence Beresford, ex-agents of the British Intelligence in the first and the second war, appeared first in *The Secret Adversary*, and Christie continued to write about their adventures in several other books.[18]

Tuppence (Prudence) Beresford is the most stereotypically feminine of all the female detective characters of Agatha Christie. She is the classic example of the clichéd illogical woman: she is the one who uses almost only her intuition and curiosity, instead of any kind of pattern or logic. In *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* the already retired Beresfords visits an aunt in a pensioner's home, where Tuppence meets a strange old lady who tells her something about a dead child. Tuppence out of curiosity starts to investigate, and finally she bumps into a complicated case of murder, madness and even a smuggler band. As there is almost no Agatha Christie book without at least one remark about men looking down on women (in one way or another, though mostly because of their supposed lack of intelligence) *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* is no exception, and Tuppence is a perfect subject of these remarks. The male characters in the novel think, that Tuppence is nothing but a meddlesome nosey-parker with not much of a brain: "Oh, I see – " Mr. Sprig masked as best he could an expression of "the foolishness of women is incredible" (91). Sometimes it is Tuppence herself, who encourages this thought. She is rather like a

[18] The Tommy and Tuppence Beresford novels are: *The Secret Adversary, Partner in Crime, N or M?, By the Pricking of My Thumbs, Postern of Fate.*

clueless teenager, than a grown-up mature woman, full of juvenile beliefs and fears: “But it’s lawyers,” Tuppence insisted. “It’s a man’s job always to deal with lawyers. They just think women are silly and don’t pay attention —” / “A very sensible point of view,” said Tommy. (40).

She always gets into trouble because of her female intuitions — never because of her logic. She is unable to explain why she feels strange about events, “I don’t quite know,” said Tuppence slowly. “It’s like the fairy stories. *By the pricking of my thumbs – Something evil this way comes* – I felt suddenly scared.” (42).[19] She is not only uncertain about her motivation, but also about her expressing herself. And — as Mr Rafiel puts it in *A Caribbean Mystery* — men usually do not have high respect for this feature: “Women!’ snorted Mr Rafiel in exasperation. ‘You’re all the same, the whole blinking lot of you! Can’t be accurate. You’re never exactly sure of what a thing was…” (*A Caribbean Mystery,* 154).

The representation of Tuppence is thus that of a stereotypical woman in this (using only intuition) and in many other senses— as the story goes on we not only witness her girlish-womanish ways, but we are also getting more and more familiar with her ‘female’ investigation method. The portrayal of her character is often written with irony, for instance, the way Tuppence finds out where she saw a house in question is portrayed rather mockingly ‘girlish’ — she remembers the occasion because of her attire, the hat and shoes she wore:

[19] In the quotation above there are some problems with the words she uses. First, the quotation does not come from a fairy tale, but from Shakespeare’s play Macbeth. But Tuppence does not even mention the name of Shakespeare, just fairy tales. Rather interesting why — whether it deliberately shows Tuppence’s lack of punctual knowledge or it is just accidental? In Macbeth, it is the Second Witch, who says at Macbeth’s arrival in Act IV. Scene I.: “By the pricking of my thumbs/ Something wicked this way comes”. It is interesting that Tuppence says “evil” instead of “wicked”. Is it just an alternative version of Shakespeare’s line, or it also refers to the unpunctual knowledge of Tuppence? (Thorndike 836).

> A hat, for instance — Yes, a hat that she had thrown up on the rack. She had been wearing a hat – so – a wedding or the christening – certainly not the puppies. And — another flash — kicking off her shoes — because her feet hurt. Yes – that was definite – she had been actually looking at the House – and she had kicked off her shoes because her feet hurt. So, then, it had definitely been a social function she had either been going to, or returning from – Returning from, of course – because of the painfulness of her feet from long standing about in her best shoes. And what kind of a hat? Because that would help – a flowery hat – a summer wedding – or a velvet winter one?" (48).

Tuppence is also leaning on her sixth sense rather fanatically, and she always jumps on it, when she sees it in another woman: "You know something," said Tuppence. "You know something about all this, don't you?" / "In a way," said Emma Boscowan, "in a way I do, and in a way I don't. One has instincts, feelings, you know. When they turn out to be right, it's worrying." (*By the Pricking of my Thumbs* 166). However, Tuppence, being a sensitive woman, can understand the importance of such a sense, her husband, Tommy, is incapable of it: "She knows things," said Tuppence, "but I'm not sure that she knows them because she knows them, if you know what I mean." / " I don't," said Tommy firmly (*By the Pricking of My Thumbs* 173.) No matter how hard she tries, she would never make her husband understand, the most he is capable of is to admit that it exists: "Well, I mean, there's one way of knowing things. The other way is that you sort of feel them." / "That's rather the way you go in for, Tuppence." (*By the Pricking of My Thumbs* 174). Nevertheless Tuppence is not the only female character in Agatha Christie's detective stories who has this sixth sense, she frequently uses this feature, and Hercule Poirot

himself also appreciates intuition, "'Instinct is a marvellous thing' mused Poirot. 'It can neither be explained nor ignored.'" (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 127). Having a sixth sense, in Agatha Christie's works, is frequently associated with the 'female sphere', as a kind of affirmation of the sphere. Since such a sixth sense can also be considered as something to 'learned' to be hidden as an ability inferior to the five senses that are valued in a 'normal' patriarchal society.

The outsider of the patriarchal society, Poirot, first appears in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, where he encounters his friend Hastings, he has known earlier from Belgium, where he had been the inspector of the Belgian Police. Because of the First World War he had to flee from Belgium and he is recovering at Styles, the property of Mrs. Inglethorp, when she is murdered. Because this is the first time we meet Poirot, Christie takes great care to explain the reader his peculiar method of investigation. The novel is written in first person singular by Arthur Hastings, and thus Poirot explains his view about the nature of trifles to him:

> 'That's very well,' I objected, 'but how are you going to decide what is important, and what isn't?' That always seems the difficulty to me.'
> … 'Not so. *Voyons*! One fact leads to another — so we continue. … And that little curious fact, that possibly paltry little detail that will not tally, we put it here!' … 'It is significant! It is tremendous!' … 'Beware! Peril to the detective who says: "It is too small — it does not matter. It will not agree. I will forget it." That way lies confusion! Everything matters.' (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 37-38).

Hercule Poirot is frequently despised for his interest in gossips, domestic ‘trifles’, and his methods of investigation can be described as (in keeping with the conclusions of the previous chapters) genuinely feminine. He takes every tiny detail into account, patiently listens to the tittle-tattle, considers the emotions of the people surrounding a case, and finally with the help of his ‘grey cells’ arrives to a conclusion. His eccentric behaviour, his vanity, and his effeminized perception moves him away from traditional “male heroism” (Rowland 19), — and ironically, his name refers exactly to Hercules, the archetype of giant masculinity. In addition, he is also a foreigner: he is a Belgian man, who lives in England and speaks perfect English, yet he is not ‘pure English’, and no more ‘pure Belgian’, just as he is not purely masculine or purely feminine. Thus he is a double outsider in the world of the ‘proper English gentlemen’. He does not subscribe to his name; he throws himself in the continuum regarding both his nationality and his sex. Still, however harshly criticised, his method is the exclusively successful one: his eccentricity gives him passports and insights, and only by entering the domestic ‘female sphere’ can a domestic murder be solved. “This is the only way he can enter to the domesticated sphere of the emerging genre…. It is an exposition of gender strategies within the self; usually the intuitive, empathetic and feminized aspect of the masculine detective, … the feminine structuring of knowledge, as a valuable and necessary mode of detection alongside the traditionally masculine gendered manners of the law, is the only method that can finally solve the murder mysteries.” (Rowland 21-24). The eccentric position of Poirot enables him to openly expose his feminine characteristics, and he can allow himself to use stereotypically feminine manners and methods. He can interpret the signs of women and he can accept and understand their points of view, read their texts. With the help of his outsider’s insight, Poirot sees through even the most complicated domestic affairs, where stereotypical masculine detection would have failed a long time ago. His problematic

status proves to be a great advantage, since because he does not belong to the male or the female sphere exclusively, he can freely enter both of them, without accepting or adjusting to the traditional, culturally constructed gender roles.

So far we have seen the investigation methods of Agatha Christie's detectives: Miss Marple's crime patterns, Tuppence's intuitive detecting technique and the advantages of Poirot's eccentric position. Now let us turn to the clues Christie's detectives deem important, and why these clues can be described as stereotypically feminine.

3.2.2. Feminine Clues – Nail Clippings, Waterlily, and Ygdrasil

Nail clippings as a main evidence?

The clues, which the detectives of Agatha Christie consider important, are frequently deemed insignificant from a male point of view, just as the clues discovered by Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles.* Miss Marple, Tuppence and Poirot usually stick to 'feminine details' such as evening dresses or perfumes, and the 'femininity' of the clues and methods seems to gain more and more ground, when we move further away from the edge of the male sphere, towards the 'centre' of the female sphere: from Poirot to Tuppence. Poirot, the eccentric outsider, with the help of his special insight, takes every tiny detail into consideration, but always sieves his discoveries through his filter of logical theories. Miss Marple, the observer of human nature, fits the pieces of evidence into her crime patterns, like in a huge jigsaw puzzle, in order to get a clear image. Tuppence, the 'intuitionist' does not have any filters or patterns, just her feelings. Stereotypically speaking, — and excessively simplifying the process, — this movement from the methods of Poirot to the methods of Tuppence seems to be a movement between two extremes. The two furthest points of this scale are the hypothetical 'almost masculine logic', where Poirot dwells, on the borderline; and the 'extreme female sensitivity', where Tuppence stands, in the centre of the female sphere, while Miss Marple lingers between the two of them. The investigation methods these detectives use, and the 'quantity of logic' in their character in a way determines the 'gender of the clues' as well. On the 'gender of the clues' I mean the result of a stereotyped association process, in which people decide over the 'sexual identity' of an item. Referring again to Saussure, signifiers can have a gender aspect as well, for example the signified 'corset' evokes the concept of a piece of clothing,

a shape, and also the sex of the wearer. However in our days many things are unisex, still, due to our cultural conditionings, we assign gender qualities to items and thoughts, and even to feelings. For example if we hear ‘hammer’, ‘gun’, or ‘to fight’ we automatically associate them with masculinity, while if we hear ‘quilt’, ‘hair-dye’ or ‘to cradle’, we would think to femininity and females. Stereotypes not only influence the portrayal of the fictional characters, but also the items associated with them. In the following we are going to look at examples of these ‘gendered clues’ that the detectives meet in Agatha Christie’s crime stories.

An intricate domestic drama requires a careful and seemingly ‘harmless’ investigator, such as Miss Marple. When the body of a young woman is found in the library of a respected old couple, Miss Marple, a friend of theirs, is called in, and during her investigations she finds ‘female clues’: nail clippings, an old shabby dress, and the question of the correct wear to meet a lover — these are the clues which lead to the arrest of the murderer in *The Body in the Library*. Beyond doubt, these can be described as ‘feminine clues’, since they can be associated with women, they belong to the female sphere out-and-out, and consequently nobody else would be able to discover them, but a woman. Even the ‘scene’ is made by a woman: the murderess, who wanted to conceal the true identity of the body of the young woman, made a trick with nails. Because her ‘doubleur’ had bitten her nails, the future victim had to have her nails cut short — so the murderer manages to break one of the victim’s nails on her shawl, thus making an excuse for pretending that she had clipped her nails close. Miss Marple, however, discovers that the dead woman’s short nails were cut and not bitten. ‘This is irrelevant!’ or ‘A mere trifle!’ — Glaspell’s Sheriff would say, — ‘Short nails are short nails. It is beside the point, whether they are cut or bitten.’ Except for Miss Marple, nobody is interested in the question, but she is resolute: “You couldn’t get away, could you, from those bitten nails?’/

‘Nails?’ said Sir Henry. ‘But she tore her nail and cut the others.’/ ‘Nonsense,’ said Miss Marple. ‘Bitten nails and close cut nails are quite different!’…. And they could only mean one thing. The body in the library wasn’t Ruby Keene at all.” (*The Body in the Library* 265-66). Thanks to Miss Marple’s discovery, the female murderer was arrested, based on a ‘female evidence’.

Closely observed details, especially when they are combined with ‘female intuition’, are those that lead Tuppence Beresford hot on the murderer’s trail. She immediately feels strange looking at a painting, discovering a house with a boat in the foreground that looks familiar to her. But when she tells his husband about it, he dismisses her, claiming that the picture is of bad quality, and thus not worth looking at in details. For him, it is only the quality of the painting, that is important, its value expressed in money, and not the value expressed in ‘bad feelings’. Though the painting is worthless in a material sense, it becomes priceless psychologically — it is directly connected to a murderer. As the log cabin pattern and the mismatched quilting suggest the emotional turmoil of Mrs. Wright, the painting, and the boat called Waterlily, painted with different brushstrokes than the rest of the picture, conveys personal information about the murderer. The oddities of the painting, combined with Tuppence’s bad feelings and later her background knowledge of a murdered child, makes her look for the house (using the ‘summer hat –method’ discussed in the previous chapters). When, at the end of the novel, everything is explained, the boat in fact turns out to be an important clue — it covers the dead child’s name, which the mad murderess once had written on the picture. Because Tuppence is not a really logical detective, she cannot put factual clues together, — the story of the dead child and the meaning of Waterlily are actually told to her — but her ‘female intuition’ makes her alert to psychological clues that prove to be more useful in her detection as factual pieces of evidence.

The most logical detective from the three mentioned, is without doubt Hercule Poirot. Obsessed by order in his private life, he demands order and logic in his investigations as well. No tiny detail would escape his attention, "…I am much worried,'/ 'Why?'/ 'Because Madame Cynthia does not take sugar in her coffee.' /'What? You cannot be serious?'/ 'But I am most serious….'(*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 63). For him there is no such thing as a 'trifle', everything counts: "'It is certainly curious,' I agreed. 'Still, it is unimportant, and need not be taken into account.' A groan burst from Poirot. 'What have I always told you? Everything must be taken into account. …' "(*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 82). He sticks to details, and observes these tiny facts in a 'feminine way', combining them with emotional understanding. For Poirot factual-, and psychological clues are of equal importance, mostly when they are combined. For example he draws a conclusion of the automatic drawing of one of the suspects in *The Hollow*:

> "Ygdrasil sign? The funny tree like no tree that ever was I used to draw on bits of paper? I still do, … I doodle it all the time." She had taken a pencil and now she was idly drawing the outline of a fantastic tree on the white painted wood of the bench… Poirot watched her. …'
>
> "And so, when you doodle… it is always Ygdrasil you draw?"
>
> "Yes. Doodling is a funny thing, isn't it?"
>
> "Here on the seat … or on the pavilion on Sunday morning…"
>
> "No, I wasn't there then."
>
> "That," said Hercule Poirot, "is your story. But Ygdrasil, Mademoiselle, testifies against you." (*The Hollow* 44, 160-61)

The combination of psychological and material evidence as a complex text, is as much betraying for Poirot, as it was for Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in *Trifles.* The psychological indication laid stress on the circumstantial pieces of evidence, in conclusion Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters realised, that Minnie Wright herself has knotted the rope around her husband's neck. Such psychological indications are frequently used in Agatha Christie's crime stories, too, the way the victim gets murdered often refers to his or her behaviour, or the sin he or she have committed.

Both Miss Marple and Poirot are also masters in evaluating emotional reactions, they think reactions are as important in examining a situation, as the clues they are (intentionally or unintentionally) materialised in. In a dialogue with one of the main suspects Poirot expresses his opinion: "'Clues, I suppose. Don't policemen look for clues? Cigarette ash, footprints, burnt matches." …/"Yes, they look for these things — and sometimes they find them. But the real clues, Miss Savernake, in a case like this, usually lie in the personal relationships of the people concerned." (*The Hollow* 121). If we simplify the question and reduce it to base binary oppositions again, we can differentiate between the 'real clues'. Let us take into consideration the stereotypical material (male) vs. immaterial (female) dichotomy that we have concluded about hypothetical gendered perception methods. In this sense material, factual pieces of evidence can be connected to 'male perception', and immaterial, psychological pieces of evidence can be related to 'female perception'. According to this idea, psychological pieces of evidence can also be regarded as 'female clues'.

Besides realising these 'female clues', Poirot always takes the trouble to listen to everybody's opinion about a person, and does not confine himself to the public 'he is the pillar of the society' image, since public image and private image are often unlike, as we have already seen in the case of John Wright. In the following let me illustrate how public

and private duality appears in the crimes stories of Agatha Christie, in connection with law and morality.

3.3.3. Feminine "Justices" – The Exception Proves the Rule

In the previous chapters we have seen what the methods of Miss Marple, Tuppence Beresford, and Hercule Poirot are; and what kind of clues they consider important in a murder case. Let us examine now, how they interpret justice and morality, and what they think about law in general. As we shall see, the three detectives have a similar 'feminine understanding' of these concepts, than Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in *Trifles*, namely, that they have a critical interpretation of them.

Interestingly, Miss Marple, who "… had been brought up to have a proper regard for truth and was indeed by nature a very truthful person" (*A Caribbean Mystery* 35) time and again can reconsider ethics, and regards moral questions with the same flexibility as Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters in *Trifles*. Miss Marple becomes most unambiguous and clear-headed about identifying and punishing murder and "on certain occasions, when she considered it her duty to do so, she could tell lies with a really astonishing verisimilitude." (*A Caribbean Mystery* 36). Sometimes she abuses her stereotypical gender role, and pretends to be far less intelligent, as she is in reality, and maintains her 'just an old lady' image, to remain invisible for the possible suspects. She does not even refrain from pretending to be a close family relation of one of the suspects, or acting as if she were to collect donations, in order to get information. Her methods remain unrecognized to the legal system until the final denouement, when legal proof or confession will be provided, and sometimes even longer: from time to time Miss Marple remains silent about her discoveries. In *The Mirror Crack'd* for example, the loving husband kills his pitiable murderous wife, so she would not have to face the forthcoming trial and public shame, which decision is approved by Miss Marple. For her, and for both Tuppence Beresford and Hercule Poirot, the concept of truth, law, and justice have a unique 'common

denominator', they tend to regard the interest of the 'survivors' of the murder cases more, than conceptual law, and their decision is also influenced by the personality and the reasons of the murderer. In those cases, in which they have to decide about whether to make the truth public or not, the murderer is already dead (committed suicide or someone helped them to avoid humiliation). To taint one's name posthumously, especially when the murderer had a sad or miserable history, would not be morally right. It is morality, what the detectives bear in mind, instead of public law.

Tuppence Beresford also faces moral questions when she investigates the case of the (allegedly) dead, mad, mass-killer wife in *By the Pricking of My Thumbs*. The murderess at the end of the book poisons herself (or her husband helps her to do so, it is ambiguous), and Tuppence has to decide about telling the truth publicly or not — the wife is dead already, it does not help digging out all the past wrongdoings. Finally she chooses to let sleeping dogs lie: "But I don't think we'll go on looking for any Mrs. Johnson, if that is what you want to ask us not to do", for what the heartbroken husband thanks her gratefully *(By the Pricking of My Thumbs* 190). Her sympathy for the wretched, broken husband is stronger than her respect for the law, and she even feels sorry for the murderess, because her insane condition. Tuppence is overwhelmingly influenced by her own emotions, she lets her own 'feminine morals' win over her civic duty to denounce a murderer to the police.

As in Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, it often turns out that the murderer, the abused and mistreated housewife, was the 'true victim', and even Poirot can back up a murderer as the way of exacting a kind of justice. What the "feminized detective discovers is that the law is not an infallible system for administering justice" (Rowland 21), that truth and justice are not always the same. In *The Hollow,* while investigating the murder, he is asked several times whether he is contended to have the truth, or he wants legal justice: "If you were to

know the truth — if you were to be told the truth I think — I think perhaps that might satisfy you? Would it satisfy you, M. Poirot?" (*The Hollow* 172), he answers he wants both. But this remains a theory, because when the broken-hearted murderer accidentally commits suicide, he does not stick to making the whole case exposed publicly: "I say myself that an end such as this is merciful. For her — and for two innocent children." (*The Hollow* 183). Out of pity he decides to keep the truth to himself, and he even conceals the evidence, just as Mrs. Hale does in *Trifles*, and invents a story for the public: "The holster. I take this. And poor Madame Christow, she was overwrought, her husband's death was too much for her. It will be brought in that she took her life whilst of unsound mind —" (*The Hollow* 185). In this case he sacrificed his pride of being the best detective of the whole world, which is so extremely important for him, and let the public think he failed, and left a case of murder unsolved. This self-sacrifice can be observed in *Trifles*, as well, when Mrs. Hale and Mrs. Peters choose to remain silent about their discoveries, thus undertaking the ongoing disparagement of their husbands.

Poirot has the same critical view of justice and morality, than the heroines of Susan Glaspell's play. He has high respect for the emotions, can easily communicate with and understand women, and always sympathises with people who are in love, especially with females, often manipulating the situation to bring happiness to their lives. Once he even abuses law, for the sake of a woman's happiness: "'To speak or not to speak," as your so great Shakespeare says, "that is the question".' …/ 'You are not serious, Poirot?'/ 'I am of the most serious. For the most serious of all things hangs in the balance.' /'And that is?' /'A woman's happiness, *mon ami,*' he said gravely." (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 155). By which decision he enforces husband and wife to stick together on a trial, and manages to revive a dying marriage. For him, the happiness of the survivors is much more

important, than justice in black and white, and he is even prepared to sacrifice his own interest for the sake of others.

So far we have seen how stereotypes can affect literary texts. Susan Glaspell's inheritance influenced detective literature both in the presentation of socially constructed gender roles and in the portrayal of the characters by assigning culturally ascribed norms of behaviour to them. We could observe the same processes in Agatha Christie's crime stories, examining her female detective characters, and we have also seen, that besides the hypothetical female and male spheres there is a third, overlapping sphere for the eccentric effeminized detective. At this point let me turn to the 21st century representations of the female detectives in the 'new' media of cinema and television.

4. Professional Female Detectives on the Screen: Jessica Fletcher, Marjorie Mallard and Mabel West

In the previous chapters I have illustrated the first stages of the evolution of the female detectives, with the help of an early play of Susan Glaspell, then as a next station, one of the novels of Collins, the father of detective literature, and finally, the works of Agatha Christie, a main author of popular crime stories. We have seen what common features their stereotypical female and effeminized characters have, and how they relate to the traditional concepts of the 'separate spheres'. In the following I am going to present the contemporary, 21st century appearances of this theme in popular culture, and how the presentation of the female detectives has altered to meet the needs of the audience.[20]

With the invention of the motion picture and television, it was only a matter of time that Agatha Christie's fictional detectives would be visible on the big screen. The first appearance of Miss Marple was the film *Murder, She Said* directed by George Pollock (Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer Pictures), starring Margaret Rutherford, in 1962. The film was not a blockbuster, half-successful adaptations followed each other, and it was not until twenty years later, from 1984 to 1992, that the BBC started to adapt the original Miss Marple novels as a series titled *Miss Marple,* in what Joan Hickson played the leading role. These programmes followed the plots of the original novels more closely, than the previous film-,

[20] It is not only the concept of female detectives that inspired 21st century movie-makers. One of the "most recent incarnations" of Susan Glaspell's *Trifles* is the film *Legally Blonde* (2001) writes Kelly A. Marsh. One has to admit, there are striking similarities between the play and its 21st century variety, the pinky-funny-girlpower film. Marsh feels that "The similarities between *Trifles* and *Legally Blonde* underline the continuity in women's issues: the importance of sisterhood, the need to provide options for disadvantaged or abused women, and the destructive potential of the objectification and devaluation of women by men." The main character of *Legally Blonde*, Elle Woods, a gorgeous but rather mindless girl begins her first year of law school, where she turns out to be quite witty and in her first legal case she manages to defend her fellow sister of "Delta Nu" (a body shaping technique). As in *Trifles*, the key pieces of evidence are those the men overlook: Prada shoes, man in thong or the rules of perm maintenance. Although in the case of *Legally Blonde* — contrary to *Trifles*— the discovered truth is what saves the innocent defendant. (Marsh 1)

and television-adaptations had, and Joan Hickson has come to be regarded by many as the authoritative Miss Marple.[21] But these are only adaptations, and what I am eager to present is an almost 'original' television programme, that sprang from the popularity of the characters of Agatha Christie, especially that of Miss Marple[22].

It is not accidental, I presume, that Angela Lansbury, after playing Miss Marple in *The Mirror Crack'd* (1980), went on to star in (and to be one of the producers of) the television series *Murder, She Wrote*, which was aired in America from September 1984 to May 1991.[23] In the series, mystery novelist Jessica Fletcher, an American middle-class widow, accidentally encounters and solves crimes, first in her close neighbourhood, the small village of Cabot Cove, Maine, then during her travels around America. The character of Jessica Fletcher was based on Miss Marple, and she, similarly to Miss Marple, also has a nephew, Grady Fletcher. However, there are elements that distinguish the character of Jessica Fletcher from Agatha Christie's Miss Marple, most importantly, that she has a career as a writer (and later in the series as a university teacher in New York) that contributes to her vitality. Correspondingly to Miss Marple, Jessica Fletcher notices details, which seem inconsequential, but later prove central to the solution; however her

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[21] For the history of the Agatha Christie adaptations see: http:// www.imdb.com; http://www. britmovie. co.uk

[22] It is not only Miss Marple, whose character inspired a television series. Agatha Christie's other famous detective, Hercule Poirot also proved to be extremely influential. First if we think about the possible eccentricity of detectives, the name of Inspector Jacques Clouseau (from the *Pink Panther* series) may come into our minds, whose idiotic behaviour is a witty parody of Hercule Poirot. But to mention a contemporary realisation of the eccentric detective, let me refer to a new television series titled *Monk*. The Emmy and Golden Globe winning American television series, starring Tony Shalhoub, was premiered in 2002, and its 6th season is being aired in the United States at the moment. The main character, Adrian Monk, is the eccentric detective of the 21st century, since he does not have problems with stereotypical gender spheres, rather with his own psyche: he has an extreme case of obsessive-compulsive disorder crowned with hundreds of phobias. It is interesting, that because of the popularity of the series, Lee Goldberg has written several novels based on the show, inverting the usual order of and relationship between books and films. http:// www. usanetwork. com/series /monk

[23] For the history of the series see: www.imdb.com

methods are slightly different. She is a more active character, than Miss Marple, she is an energetic, forceful personality who can never be dismissed. There are times, when her help is asked, but most often she offers her help voluntarily to the police, and her determination finally wins over the sceptic policemen. Jessica Fletcher is not the keen observer of human nature; nor does she go after her intuitions, she searches for material clues to present instead. In a way, she is a rather 'masculinised' character, more like Sherlock Holmes, Columbo or Thomas Magnum, than Miss Marple, with her resolute manners, but she often meets the disadvantages of being 'just' a woman, since the policemen she encounters with are not always without prejudices toward the 'weaker sex' or her lively fantasy of an author. Nevertheless, she always manages to prove her right, and save the innocent suspects from prison.

Taking one episode as an example, let us examine *Angel of Death*, where Jessica is invited to his playwright friend, Martin's seaside house because strange things are happening to him. Arriving there, she finds in the house her friend's ex-lover (former secretary, now blind sculptor), his stepdaughter and her husband, his brother-in-law (who is also the family lawyer), and his director with his wife. It turns out that the wife of Martin, who has committed suicide long ago, haunts him and soon a murder takes place – the stepdaughter's husband is stabbed. The local sheriff is invited, who (contrary to the policemen's attitude in other episodes of the series) voluntarily accepts Jessica Fletcher as an assistant, investigating the crime. Finally it is Jessica, who solves the mystery: she finds the bloody knife hidden in a wet clay statue[24] – she notices clay-fingerprints on the windowsill, and confronts the murderer – the brother in law, who committed the crime out

[24] In Agatha Christie's *The Hollow* the revolver with which the victim was shot is hidden in a clay statue, and it would be interesting to examine, to what degree the series *Murder, She Wrote* used Agatha Christie's works as a source for the different parts of the series. Christie's influence on the whole series is obvious, when we consider that the main character of the series *Murder, She Wrote* is based on Christie's Miss Marple and Ariadne Oliver, and it is further stressed, when we remember that Angela Lansbury played Miss Marple in 1980, and the series was launched from 1984, with Angela Lansbury as one of the directors.

of jealousy – though, as it turns out, he has killed the wrong person in the darkness. Jessica also finds it an important clue that the dogs of his friend bark only at strangers – this is how she realises that the murderer must have been a family member. However, the crucial evidence is when the murderer is caught red-handed trying to recover the bloody knife from the statue. It also turns out that the ghost of the deceased wife is in reality no one else but the stepdaughter, who gave Martin drugs to trigger visions in him, because she hated Martin whose infidelity she held responsible for her mother's suicide.

The plot of the episodes is not really varied, nearly each follows the storyline I outlined above, and however they have a sudden turn at the end concerning the identity of the murderer, (or thief, or blackmailer) the series remains a light-hearted one-hour entertainment for crime lovers. Usually the characters are conventional 'types' of people, maintaining the long-lasting stereotypes, such as the gossipy hairdresser, the moody sailor, the young playboy, or the hardworking computer 'geek'. Similarly, the episodes deal with eternal situations, like the case of the cuckolded old husband and his young wife's lover. Nevertheless we can meet the dramatization of more recent conflicts, such as the 'red scare', when Jessica helps a Russian ballet-dancer couple to get residence permit. The adaptation of eternal topics to the contemporary setting must have contributed to the popularity of the series, but maybe the 1980s was the suitable decade to introduce female detectives on the screen to the audience on such a large scale. The most remarkable feature of the series is the steady popularity of the character of Jessica Fletcher, the elderly female amateur sleuth, as the adjustment of the female detective to the altered social status of women in the 21st century.

Agatha Christie's inheritance flooded the cartoon world, too. To the best of my knowledge, there are two animated series that are really closely connected to the image of Miss Marple. The first is about the adventures of Miss Mallard, the duck lady who, with

the help of her nephew[25], Inspector Willard Widgeon, solves mysteries by discovering small clues and hidden pieces of evidence. However, because it is a series for children, there are no murders — the viewers can follow the elderly, but always elegantly dressed duck-lady travelling around the world encountering mysteries like robbery or feud. The first episode of the series, *Lost in the Amazon*[26] shows Miss Mallard and her nephew Willard in Brazil, where an old friend of Miss Mallard, Professor Eidenstein, is kidnapped and his new serum, Jungle NU, is stolen. Miss Mallard finds clues: a butterfly the professor has drawn on the invitation card, a leaf of grass from a grass skirt and a telephone out of order. Her nephew, Willard, and the local policemen cannot understand the importance of these clues at first, but at the end everything is explained. Thus Miss Mallard combines the virtues of Miss Marple and Jessica Fletcher — her 'Miss Marpleish' features are that she is just a 'stereotypical' innocent elderly duck-lady, who constantly knits, usually visits her friends or she is on holiday accompanied by his nephew. But she is much more active, than the elderly spinster of Agatha Christie — just as Jessica Fletcher, she is energetic, she is in for physical activity, she follows the 'bad ducks' by bicycle, by boat, even sets traps. The *Miss Mallard Mysteries* animated films[27], are very popular and a great success among children. They are shown on television in over seventy countries and in five languages around the world. Though the cartoon series is said to serve mainly

[25] Nephews seem to be compulsory „additions" of the Miss Marpleish characters. It is interesting, that the amateur sleuth Miss Marple's nephew is a writer, Jessica Fletcher is a writer and an amateur sleuth, who has a nephew, too; and Miss Mallard is also an amateur sleuth, whose nephew is a policeman. As far as I am concerned, this is no tan accidental coincidence, rather a witty reference to and/or a pun of the original Miss Marple frame.

[26] The old friend of Miss Marjorie Mallard, Dr Eidenstein sends Miss Mallard an invitation for a conference of S.A.R.F., a group to save rainforests of Brazil. Dr Eidenstein has found a new serum, Jungle NU that can make plants grow really fast, which collides with the interest of land speculators and the professor gets threatening letters. During the conference the professor is kidnapped by fake carnival dancers, and the serum is stolen. Miss Mallard finds clues: a leaf of grass from a dancer's grass skirt, a butterfly drawn on her invitation card and a telephone out of order. She discovers that there is a territory in the Brazilian jungle in the shape of a butterfly so they decide to go there. The journey is really dangerous, but finally they manage to find the professor in a small village of a native tribe. It turns out that the professor himself planned his own kidnap, in order to carry on searching without being disturbed. They return to Rio de Janeiro with the professor and Miss Mallard finds the stolen serum in the telephone box. She also finds the thieves, the greedy land speculators.

[27] 2000—2001, Cinar Productions, based on the children books of Robert Quackenbush.

educational purposes (developing the logic of children) it is also a significant phase of the evolution of the female detectives. It is interesting to observe that in the portrayal of Miss Mallard, it is not the stereotypical elderly spinster, who is depicted, but rather the stereotypical Miss Marple. Her fictional character is now so widely known and traditionalized, that Miss Marple herself became a stereotype.

There is even a Japanese anime and manga series based on Agatha Christie's novels, however not as popular as the adventures of Miss Mallard, because it is shown only in Japan, and not all around the world. The series titled *Agatha Christie's Great Detectives Poirot and Marple* features both Miss Marple and Hercule Poirot[28]. The series is a mixture of a 'bildungsroman', — the presentation of a young girl's personal development, which is very typical of Japanese anime stories, — and the classic crime stories of Agatha Christie. The young audience can meet Miss Marple, his nephew Raymond West, Hercule Poirot, and Arthur Hastings as well; the only new character is Mabel West, the fourteenish daughter of Raymond West, Miss Marple's great-niece, who becomes Hercule Poirot's junior assistant, thus connecting the two detective characters. The series re-tells the famous Christie stories, starting with *The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan* (*Poirot Investigates*) and includes the alternated versions of *Sleeping Murder, Death in the Clouds,* or the *ABC Murders*, too. We first meet the characters in the episode entitled *The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan,* when Mabel West proves her clear sight and intelligence. The creation of such a series in this popular Asian medium reflects on the incredible flexibility of Christie's work, and that female detectives can be appreciated by people of many different cultures and age groups. In addition the character of Mabel West offers the extension of the concept of female detectives: namely that not only mature

[28] Produced by Japanese television network NHK, from 2004 to 2005. Directed by Naohito Takahashi. A manga series under the same title was also released in 2004-2005.

women can investigate, but young girls, too[29]. To a degree it leads to a new set of stereotypes and another sphere, based on not gender, but age differences: it activates the children's sphere not only because of the age of the character, but through the genre itself. The cartoon is an ambivalent genre, an "uncanny" (unheimlich) medium in the Freudian sense. Its technical potential is limitless; everything is possible in its invented world, so to separate the imaginary real from the imaginary unreal is extremely difficult. In the complex universe of the cartoons and films it is even possible to abandon stereotypes, and even a teenager girl or a duck lady can become a great detective. In the last fifty years the audience could meet more and more female detectives, as the improved versions of the same concept, such as Charlie's Angels and its 'cartoon-sister' Totally Spies, or the recent series about the high school private detective Veronica Mars[30]. This wide variety reflects the important changes of gender roles in history, which is still in progress now.

[29] In the episode *The Jewel Robbery at the Grand Metropolitan* we meet Mabel West, who is at the same party with Hercule Poirot and Arthur Hastings, and because her pet duck Oliver escapes and causes a small scandal at the party, her father, Raymond West scorns her. During their quarrel their main misunderstanding is revealed: Mabel does not want to go to boarding school. When one of the rich ladies' diamonds are stolen and her maid is suspected, Mabel expresses her doubt about the accusation, which Hercule Poirot overhears and praises her logic. They start to investigate together, and it is Mabel who assists Poirot at the final unveiling of the true thieves. Mable also has an emotional dialogue conversation with Hastings, and she decides to joins Poirot as his junior assistant.

[30] *Charlie's Angels* is a television series about three women who work for a private investigation agency, and is one of the first shows to showcase women in roles traditionally reserved for men. The series was broadcast on the ABC Television Network from 1976 to 1981 and was one of the most successful series of the 1970s. *Totally Spies* is a French animated television series starring three teenaged super-spies from Beverly Hills, who secretly fight international crime with special gadgets. Its production began in 2001; the show is currently airing its fifth and final season. *Veronica Mars* is an American teen drama/mystery series premiered in 2004 and ended in 2007. Veronica Mars, a student who progressed from high school to college during the series while moonlighting as a private investigator under the wing of her detective father. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Charlie%27s_Angels; http://www.totallyspies.com/_php/index.php?lang=uk; http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Veronica_mars.

5. Conclusion

By examining Susan Glaspell's *Trifles*, Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*, the crime stories of Agatha Christie, and 21st century adaptations of Miss Marple, we have seen that gender roles assigned for women and the concept of trifles are linked in (detective) literature. Due to gender stereotypes and culturally ascribed roles, even fictional characters are biased, and I have pinpointed the mechanism of perpetual stereotyping through literary texts that subliminally problematize these stereotypes. My aim was to illustrate, that in these works female and effeminized characters are treated in an off-hand manner, because of their supposed lack of intellect and hypothetically inferior status. I have exemplified that the presence of the 'female sphere' in these crime stories enlightens and reinforces stereotypical differences between the sexes. I have chosen detective fiction to observe the concept of trifles, the questions of law and morality, and the status of women, and finally to outline the evolution of the concept of the female detective in 21st century popular culture. I have illustrated the adjustment of the different media to the issue of stereotypical gender roles, and how social changes triggered the exploitation of the further possibilities hidden in these media.

It is impossible to get rid of all our stereotypes at once, still, if we are aware of their existence, we may have a new, less biased interpretation of the texts of our surroundings.

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