

**Agatha Christie's Greatest Creation and His Fate – Hercule Poirot in the Changing World of Culture**

**Katarína Brziaková**  
"Comenius" University in Bratislava  
Slovakia

**Abstract**

Looking back through the history of detective/mystery fiction I would like to find out what it is that has helped to establish the genre and win it the position it holds within literature. One of the pillars of the genre is definitely the character of the 'Great Detective', more particularly the exceptional and outstanding one - Hercule Poirot. I tried, therefore, to analyze him as a character through his creator's attitude to media and their treatment of her Detective, and the degree to which the most recent adaptations had helped to establish what can today be defined as a literary character which long ago became fixed within British pop-culture. The question, quite simple to ask but definitely not that easy to answer is – what was it that made the typical detective of the Golden Age (the period of roughly the 1920s and 1930s i.e. the most prolific years for mystery fiction) become an icon of the modern times literally round the world such a long time after his coming to life? Some information that is dealt with in this text may be generally known but I see it as important to refer to it as it is essential for understanding the process of changing the literary experts' attitude to and treatment of mystery novel, as well as for understanding the process of Poirot's becoming a (fictional) brand.

**Keywords:** *detective fiction, Hercule Poirot, adaptation, theatre, television, criticism*

**1. Introduction**

Each country, each nation has some features, objects, traditions, even people – personages which and who contribute to making the country specific, different, for some even exceptional when compared

with other nations and cultures. These tend to be perceived as elements helping to shape national identities; some of them may be defined by their exceptional properties or achievements; in more general sense we can see them as defining the culture, becoming what may be seen as cultural brands.

From the point of view of literature these tendencies are visible and ever present. British literature dates back centuries and many of old literary achievements have managed to survive until today and shape the culture, firmly fixed within our world. Some older works survive on their own i.e. they are generally so highly valued that it is not difficult to keep them alive. Some, on the other hand, are used as an inspiration for current works of contemporary authors, e.g. Jane Austen/Helen Fielding, E.M. Forster/Zadie Smith, to mention but two. Very often it is not only 'dressing old works in new, modernized outfits', often it is paying tribute to the authors' peers with their particular works or on other occasions, rediscovering the long forgotten legacy. Can this be seen as cultural branding? Can national identity be associated with fictional characters which came to life as literary creations? To try to find (an) answer(s) to these questions I will have a look at the tradition which has its roots in the USA and which, after some lapse of time, was transferred to Europe, more particularly to the UK, where it has been cultivated and has flourished ever since and which would not be complete without the character generally referred to as the 'Great Detective' - the mystery fiction.

The 'classical' mystery (detective) fiction has always been associated with the appearance of Edgar Allan Poe's first short stories in mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e. its history, compared to other literary genres is relatively short. Poe's merit lies in several aspects - he brought the psychological thriller to perfection and created the detective story by incorporating the elements of the Gothic novel in his stories. One expression that Poe frequently used in his writings is 'mystery' which, as applied to his detective stories can be best understood as 'a problem that is difficult to solve' ([www.eapoe.org](http://www.eapoe.org)) However, for a long time

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mysteries were not taken seriously, they were seen as 'escapist' literature – read when people needed to divert their thoughts from their everyday troubles by getting immersed in solving puzzles encoded in the stories with one goal only – to entertain themselves. For decades following its birth, the genre had to fight for recognition and the process of accepting mystery fiction as part of the mainstream was hard but worth the effort. Fortunately for the genre, there have always existed authors whose genuine endeavour has always been to elevate it to the same level with 'serious' literature and win acknowledgement, at which they gradually succeeded. Today it can be claimed that mysteries with all their branches have managed to win the place they deserve. One thing the genre gave to the literary world was the character of the Great Detective – the character central to the plot, endowed with unique features and properties which make him stand out. As the years went by, so the character of the Great Detective evolved. From the almost 'superhuman' Dupin or Holmes to more humanized Dalgliesh or Wexford<sup>1</sup> who are more at home in the contemporary world where private detectives and their extravagance seem rather outdated. And yet, Dalgliesh and Wexford may be well known to British (international) readers and viewers but so far it looks that they have not succeeded in achieving such world-wide iconic status as did the one character – Hercule Poirot, a detective who "... has justly earned his place as the best-known detective in the twentieth century crime fiction." (Barnard 1980: 98) Christie never made a secret of her great admiration for Doyle (Holmes). In her *Autobiography* she gives a brief outline of the way she created Poirot in which she admits:

There was Sherlock Holmes, the one and only – I should never be able to emulate *him*. ... [I] settled for a Belgian detective ...

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<sup>1</sup> Adam Dalgliesh – the Great Detective created by P. D. James (1920-2014); DCI Reginald Wexford – the Great Detective created by Ruth Rendell (1930-2015), members of the professional police force but retaining the essential qualities of the traditional Great Detective.

very brainy... he would have rather a grand name – one of those names that Sherlock Holmes and his family had. (Christie 1978: 263- 4)

On the other hand, and despite her admiration, Christie did her best not to make Poirot's character come out as a replica of Holmes. What the two detectives do share then, apart from their 'grand names', is the way they carry out their investigations:

Holmes's detective technique set the pattern for [the] combination of armchair deduction and active pursuit of clues. [I]n the end he engages in the detailed step-by-step summary of his methods that has become indispensable to the mystery format (Peterson 1984: 205) - and to Poirot.

## **2. Christie's detectives**

With the arrival of Christie, readers were offered two different types of detectives living in their separate worlds and using different investigative methods. One of them is a woman, Miss Marple, "sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, a vicious gossip with an incomparable information service and a desire to believe the worst." (Barnard 1980: 96). She is a brilliant observer. That is the property which is most important for solving the cases (most often murders). Jane Marple has lived in a village all her life. She can remember much and can make parallels of seemingly unrelated facts or events - the ability which often causes confusion, even resentment on the part of the representatives of the official police force.

The parallels that Miss Marple cites establish in the reader's mind the uneasy sense that beneath the surface calm of village life there lurks a seething lava of crimes, sins, oddities and other potential disruptions – of which murder is only the most serious example. (Barnard 1980: 28)

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With *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Christie “established the typical milieu for a ... detective story – the small English village (Barnard 1980: 25). Seemingly, life in this ‘small English village’ is idyllic and only later is the reader introduced “to the dark underside of this apparent idyll” (McCaw 2012: 45) while Rowland characterizes the setting of most of Christie’s novels as “... the rural English village [representing] a kind of expanded country house with a traditional social hierarchy firmly in place” (Rowland 2001: 49). For this, Miss Marple is an ideal creation – an elderly spinster who has seen and experienced too much of life to be misled by such impressions. In Poirot (featuring in thirty-three stories) and Miss Marple (12) Christie created two detectives who

are ... solitaires: they watch other people, always benevolently, but always detached; they generalize about life, but they do not experience it directly; they have no loves or hates, nor ever have had; people confide their affairs to them, but they do not involve them emotionally... (Barnard 1980: 93)

and who have become central figures within the genre. The character of Hercule Poirot meets all the attributes of the Great Detective. Faithful to her predecessors, Christie endowed him with “... distinguishing idiosyncrasies. ... Poirot was a Belgian immigrant with moustaches, his little grey cells, his overweening vanity, both intellectual and sartorial, and his mania for order.” (Curran 2010: 35) Being “formerly chief of the Belgian force” (Christie 1993: 7) he enters literature as a freelance private detective after “...his success brought him notoriety, and he decided to devote himself to the solving of problems in crime” (Christie 1993: 7). He is a genius of highly developed logical thinking, combination technique, and above all – has the attributes shared by all Great Detectives – the ability of deduction and observation:

His glance softened as it rested on one particular couple. A well-matched pair. ... As she sat, he could study her face, lifted laughing to her companion. There was something else beside the laughter in her eyes. Hercule Poirot shook his head doubtfully. 'She cares too much, that little one. ... It is not safe. No, it is not safe.' (Christie 2004: 20)

Another quality inherent in all the Great Detectives is eccentricity. Poirot is elegant, vain, almost narcissistic about his appearance:

My little friend, neat and dapper as ever, his egg-shaped head tilted to one side, was delicately applying a new pomade to his moustache. A certain harmless vanity was a characteristic of Poirot's and fell into line with his general love of order and method. (Christie 1993: 7),

perfectionist and very conceited: "Anyway, she begins to suspect you of something and she writes to a very famous detective – *enfin*, to the most famous detective – me!" (Christie 2004: 249) He is well aware of his own capacities and by no means is he modest. He expects to be flattered by others. Another feature making Poirot's character exceptional is his non-existent personal life, no family relations to be encountered.

In spite of Poirot's long service with the Belgian police force one never gets a sense of him as a man with a past, still less as a man with a vital personal life in the past. He exists only in the present, he has function rather than character. (Barnard 1980: 94)

Poirot first appeared in the novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). During the short period that followed (1922-1926) Christie wrote a lot of short stories featuring the Great Detective and several

adventure and spy novels of which none managed to achieve the quality of her first novel. The only exception was another Poirot novel, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1925). Perhaps this was the reason why she decided, between 1934 and 1941, to fully concentrate on writing detective stories featuring Poirot. This period coincided with the new tendency in writing mysteries when mystery novels in general were becoming "fully rational and focused on a puzzle" (Knight 2004: 90).

### **3. Poirot's 'Watsons'**

The entire history of detective stories is marked by the Great Detective's being aided, perhaps complemented, by a 'Watson' – the nickname derived from Sherlock Holmes' partner's name in solving the mysteries. In Poirot's case we encounter several 'Watsons', the most important and best known of them being Captain Arthur Hastings who joins Poirot in all the early stories – "Poirot in the early days has Hastings, as Holmes had Watson" (Barnard 1980: 94), only to disappear later and be substituted for by other 'Watsons'. At the early stages of Poirot's life and work in Britain, Hastings' role in the stories was important to emphasize the contrast between the two. Poirot was a genius, a great thinker and a good psychologist. Hastings, on the other hand, was slow, superficial in judging other people, and most often wrong in his hypotheses. That was also the reason for Poirot's "amused condescension, his kindergarten treatment of his friend and partner, which could also easily become not just monotonous, but also unpleasing." (Barnard 1980: 95) He treated Hastings with politeness and kindness but always kept his distance. Christie dropped the character of Hastings in the 1930s, when readers could no longer cope with the 'Watson narrator' (Barnard 1980: 95) – the early stories are first person narrations by Hastings reminiscing on their early collaboration – as he would possibly 'destroy the flow and unity of the story.' (Barnard 1980: 95) As Poirot's career proceeded, Hastings "... had no function in the main business of a detective story, that is, in the process of investigation." (Barnard 1980: 95) In other words, Hastings could perform small and unimportant tasks to help Poirot but

otherwise he was useless as his thinking was too limited to compete with the Great Detective. Despite abandoning Hastings, there were but few occasions when Poirot was forced to work on his own. On such rare occasions, however, Poirot sometimes even voiced his sentiments about the loss of his early partner as e.g. in the short story *How does Your Garden Grow?* "Poirot sighed. 'How I miss my friend Hastings. He had such imagination. Such a romantic mind! It is true that he always imagined wrong – but that in itself was a guide.'" (Christie 1993: 249) After Hastings' departure, Poirot's 'Watsons' were of varied kind – among them Mrs. Ariadne Oliver, a detective stories writer, a character which appeared in some of the stories and which definitely represents Agatha Christie's alter ego.

Apart from having his 'Watson', Poirot, in accordance with the tradition, often collaborates with the members of the official police force. Their role is very similar to that of Captain Hastings and largely the pattern on which the Great Detective – Inspector relationship functions remains close to that of 'Watsons'. The professionals usually initially get annoyed at the interference of 'an amateur': "'The case is going to be plain as a pikestaff,' said [Inspector] Raglan. 'Not the least need for amateurs to come butting in' (Christie 2001: 70) but they always have to admit in the end that without Poirot's sharp judgment they would not be able to unravel the puzzle. Poirot himself never seems to be perturbed by these invectives. Typically, when responding, he manages to preserve his polite manners though underlined by sarcasm:

'I have had much experience ... but most of my successes have been obtained by the aid of the police. I admire enormously your English police. If Inspector Raglan permits me to assist him, I shall be both honoured and flattered.' The inspector's countenance became ... more gracious. (Christie 2001: 70)



#### 4. Agatha Christie – the dramatist

When Julius Green's publication *Curtain Up – Agatha Christie, A Life in Theatre* was published in 2015, not many people were aware of how prolific a playwright Christie had been, with most perhaps having noticed only *The Mousetrap* (1952) as her most successful play<sup>2</sup>. In the opening pages of the book Green asks a question: "Why has history been so unkind to Agatha Christie, playwright?" (Green 2015: 3) One of the reasons, according to Green is that "Christie was notable for working outside the established ... West End oligarchy of the day..." (Green 2015: 3), while almost immediately he delivers another reason,

... [the] continued confusion over the authorship of the plays credited to her. As well as her own work for the stage there have been a number of second-rate adaptations of her novels by third parties; and this, combined with the enduring success of third-party film and television adaptations, has led to an assumption that the plays credited to her were not from her own pen. (Green 2015: 3)

Thus we get to the point of contemplating over the delayed success of Poirot. Green claims that:

There is also perhaps a misconception that Christie exploited her reputation as a novelist to promote her career in the theatre and that her theatrical successes were in some way dependent on the success of her books. ... [however] ... the expectations raised by the popularity of her detective fiction frequently

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<sup>2</sup> The play is still running, 67 years after its opening at the Theatre Royal, Nottingham. After touring different theatres in different British cities it finally opened in London, at the Ambassadors Theatre on 25/11/1952. Currently the play is performed at St Martin's Theatre, London.

hampered her progress as a playwright and prejudiced critical opinion against her work on the stage. (Green 2015: 5)

Concerning her playwright's career and the history of adaptations of her works it is evident that one of the core problems for Christie was the character of Poirot himself. She was not convinced that she wanted to see Poirot on the stage, a view which was to be proved right in the years to come. The first play to be staged was the dramatization of her novel *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.<sup>3</sup> Young actor Charles Laughton was cast as Poirot, thus becoming "...the first of numerous actors to appropriate the role of Poirot as a vehicle for their own talents..." (Green 2015: 79) which made "...Christie herself ... disconcerted by the manner in which the character pulled focus on the stage." (Green 2015: 79) and consequently "[h]er response as a playwright to seeing Poirot on stage was thus to adapt a book in which he did not feature<sup>4</sup>." (Green 2015: 80) Meanwhile, however, came another piece as Christie's West End debut, *Black Coffee*, "an original script rather than [adaptation of] one of her novels" (Green 2015: 94) which not only was "quite possibly the first full-length stage play she wrote" (Green 2015: 94) but which (still) "featured the character [of Poirot]" (Green 2015: 94) thus causing that "...Poirot was to continue to weigh heavily on Christie's theatrical ambitions..." (Green 2015: 104). However, "[f]ollowing *Black Coffee*, she never wrote another full-length play featuring Poirot, and her four stage adaptations of novels in which he appears exclude him completely." (Green 2015: 126-7) With Christie's own adaptation of a Poirot novel, *The Hollow*, without Poirot "[i]t seems that Christie had finally expunged the curse of Poirot from her stage work." (Green 2015: 281)

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<sup>3</sup> The novel was dramatized by Michael Morton and opened at the Prince of Wales Theatre, London on 15 May 1928 under the title *Alibi*.

<sup>4</sup> The novel Green refers to is *The Secret of Chimneys*. Paradoxically, the 2010 Masterpiece adaptation features the character of Miss Marple which is not to be found in the original novel.

### 5. Agatha Christie on big and small screen

Through Christie's career as a novelist and playwright, we move on and over to the fate of her literary work in the hands of different adaptors and producers representing the media which, mainly in the earlier years of her life, she did not quite trust – cinematography, and even less, television. Here we have to refer back to Green who gives an insightful contemplation over the three claiming that

The function of a detective, after all, is to observe; and in a detective novel the reader is invited to join the detective in this process. On film, camera angles and editing can focus the audience's attention on specific characters and events. But on stage the audience is liable to be distracted from the observational process by the detective's constant presence in their line of vision. (Green 2015: 79)

Christie's movie career started off relatively early. However, to assess the process is not that easy. Many of the old adaptations seem to be reappearing again and again on screens round the world which phenomenon could "give the impression that the works of Agatha Christie moved to the screen with greater ease than was actually the case." (Aldridge 2016: 9), an observation only underlined by Green's stating that "[i]n 1928 there had been a poorly executed film<sup>5</sup> based on one of the [Harley Quinn] stories." (Green 2015: 127) Mr. Quinn was followed by the film adaptations of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (Alibi) and *Black Coffee* (both in 1931) and *Lord Edgware Dies* (1934). The only surviving of these three films seems to be *Lord Edgware Dies*. It was around this time (1937) that "the first television adaptation of a Christie story took place..." (Aldridge 2016: 35) She had cooperated with the BBC before as she had worked for the radio but "... Christie

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<sup>5</sup> *The Passing of Mr. Quinn*, a British silent movie only freely 'inspired' by Christie's short story, directed by Leslie S. Hiscott

... had no interest in television – far from being a pioneering dramatist in the medium, she positively disliked it..." (Green 2015: 110) In 1937 then TV viewers saw BBC's first Poirot adaptation, Christie's own dramatization of the short story *Wasp's Nest*.

The play features only one location and four characters. .... The plot ... is dialogue driven but has a subtlety of characterization .... As was normal for television in this period the play was performed live twice... (Aldridge 2016: 39)

The original story is really 'subtle' thus well suited for the purposes (and conditions) of the early days of TV as it lasted just for twenty minutes. However, after this adaptation, it took twenty-five years for Poirot and even longer for this particular story to come back to the screen. Some fifty-four years later (1991) this first ever Christie story adapted for television, this time expanded to meet the standard length of fifty minutes, appeared again on screen as part of the ITV Poirot series<sup>6</sup>.

The 1950s saw several successful adaptations of different Christie stories in the USA. "The earliest existing adaptation of an Agatha Christie story is ... *Murder on the Nile*" (Aldridge 2016: 54), her own adaptation of the novel *Death on the Nile*. The two pieces are very similar but for Poirot being cut off from the dramatization. Generally, the American productions were successful with the audiences while the situation was quite different with British television and radio as Christie kept resisting any attempts at approaching her for negotiations about possible collaboration on adapting or introducing her stories either on television or on radio. The pieces that managed to be brought to life were often not

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<sup>6</sup> Most of the Poirot short stories are too short and 'slight' to meet current standards of dramatization processes, so the tendency to expand them is natural. This particular story was expanded by adding extra characters and events.

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successful. Making of series was frequently considered by producers but these attempts generally failed and were wrapped up after the first episode, e.g. "*The Disappearance of Mr. Davenheim*", a short story which was intended to become a pilot episode to the planned series and which "remains out of circulation ... and [remained] the last adaptation of its type for two decades." (Aldridge 2016: 71) This might have been one of the reasons why producers gave up the television ideas and decided to turn to the cinema instead. The years 1945 to 1960 saw 'four British and American films based on Agatha Christie's work'. (Aldridge 2016: 79)<sup>7</sup>, none of them featuring Poirot. The Great Detective was brought back to cinemas in 1965 in *The Alphabet Murders*. The problem with the movie adaptations of this particular decade was summed up briefly but accurately by Aldridge who stated: "...[what MGM] did not do was find a way to present Christie's original work while simultaneously preserving its ethos, characterization and plotting" (Aldridge 2016: 108). The problem with adapting Christie's stories was becoming more acute as the years went by because many of the films "have used the basis of Christie's stories without close consultation with either the author, her agents or her estate." (Aldridge 2016: 113) It was becoming more and more evident that something had to be done about the approach of producers. The crucial moment came in 1974 with the adaptation of *Murder on the Orient Express* which is seen even today as one of her best stories, "one of the crown jewels of the Christie canon" (Aldridge 2016: 124). It was this film which

saw the transition of Christie from an author whose popular appeal and plotting allowed her works to be deconstructed and reformatted for (normally) low-budget films of middling success to being treated as an author of repute... . (Aldridge 2016: 122)

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<sup>7</sup> And Then There Were None, Love from a Stranger, Witness for the Prosecution, The Spider's Web.

Among other things, stemming from the previous bad experience, Christie and her family were worried about casting the most important character of the story – Hercule Poirot. Sidney Lumet's film can be defined as a film sticking to the original story as close as possible but above all as a film cast with the greatest names of the industry, a fact that applies to the actor cast as the Great Detective, Albert Finney:

The entertainment value of Finney's Poirot should ... not be understated – although he has divided opinion among many viewers the performance was broadly well received, and he is never less than a captivating presence ... . (Aldridge 2016: 128)

The film was received positively but 'not ecstatically'. Another embodiment of the Great Detective has also his say about this film as well as about his different way of perceiving not only the character of Poirot but also the message of the novel. David Suchet claims that *Murder on the Orient Express* is "one of [Christie's] most disturbing stories, though that had never truly surfaced in the 1974 film." (Suchet 2013: 258)

*Murder on the Orient Express* was followed by *Death on the Nile* in 1978, two years after Christie's death at the age of 85. Albert Finney was replaced by Peter Ustinov. By casting him as Poirot, the producers "signalled the emergence of a warmer, more audience-friendly approach to the part. Poirot is more charming, less extreme and more real than Finney had been". (Aldridge 2016: 142)

As far as critical response to these new productions is concerned, reviewers were divided in their response – those who liked *Murder on the Orient Express* did not like *Death on the Nile* and vice versa. However, by this time it became quite obvious that "critical reviews of Christie films served little function, and the critics themselves understood this – audiences knew what to expect, and the producers were happy to supply it". (Aldridge 2016: 148) In other words,

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whatever film critics might have thought about the quality and value of these star-studded films, general public loved them. By 1982, however, when *Evil under the Sun* came to the cinemas, a new tendency began to make itself felt - viewers were beginning to get tired of this kind of stories<sup>8</sup>. This might be one of the main reasons of moving Poirot stories from big screen to television. This move was made possible also thanks to the new "deals ... that allowed television adaptations of Christie stories...." (Aldridge 2016: 152) Certain changes were introduced, e.g. the stories were set in the present, the shifts which had been done for two main reasons – the productions were cheaper and the producers considered the option of making the films more appealing or attractive to younger generation of viewers. Nevertheless, in 1986 a decision was made to return Poirot back to the big screen which happened in 1988 with *Appointment with Death*. All of these adaptations had Peter Ustinov as Poirot but his appearance did not save the falling interest in this kind of films; as Aldridge points out "its poor critical reputation reflects general boredom with pictures of this type...." (Aldridge 2016: 158) To sum it up one can see that in the 1980s time was not yet ripe for Poirot to become an international treasure. As far as Ustinov's performance is concerned, the following statement rightly and accurately uncovers the substance of the character himself:

Indeed, the Poirot that Ustinov played may not always have been close to the depiction in Christie's books, but it has remained a popular portrayal – an indication that what works on the page is not necessarily the same as what resonates with screen audiences, and as a result there was room for more than one version of such a character. (Aldridge 2016: 159)

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<sup>8</sup> Death on the Nile was followed by two non-Poirot films, *Agatha* (1979) giving an account of the author's disappearance back in 1926, and a Miss Marple story, *The Mirror Crack'd* (1980).

## 6. The rise of an icon (1988 – 2014)

In the early 1980s, BBC had produced a highly successful series based on Miss Marple stories and the possibility of turning Poirot stories into equally successful series was beginning to be quite real. Even though the negotiations seemed to be going quite well, there was one persisting problem – casting of Poirot. In the opening passage of his publication Aldridge states that there were

many attempts to solve one of the toughest problems when it came to bringing [Christie's] best-known character alive for an audience – how, exactly, can one cast the Belgian detective with his precise demeanor and curiously egg-shaped head? (Aldridge 2016: 19)

Agatha Christie herself had been well aware of this problem when, years ago, she wrote in her Autobiography: “It always seems strange to me that whoever plays Poirot is always an outsize man.” (Christie 1977: 448) This issue seems to have persisted throughout the decades in all the adaptations and with all other ‘Poirots’. Choosing David Suchet as Poirot was not difficult but it was the actor who “wasn’t sure himself” (Aldridge 2016: 244) that he was the right choice. The casting process took some time and several meetings even with the members of Christie’s family before Suchet was definitely cast in 1988. Another important point related to this process concerns Suchet’s relationship with the representatives of the Christie estate. Rosalind Hicks, Christie’s daughter, wanted him to take his role seriously so that Poirot portrayed by him would not be ridiculous. Interestingly, similar idea is expressed by Suchet himself in his publication *Poirot and Me* when he reflects on the making of their version of *Murder on the Orient Express*:

In the original story Dame Agatha ... never once made [Poirot] funny. ... There was nothing whatever to laugh about in Dame



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Agatha's magnificent story, for it confronts Poirot, a committed Catholic, with a desperate dilemma, by solving a premeditated murder based in revenge... (Suchet 2013: 259)

Suchet took his role with immense responsibility. He read through all the Poirot stories and "worked out the character, the accent, the costuming and ... Poirot's walk." (Aldridge 2016: 245) After the first parts had appeared onscreen, it became clear that the choice was right. Some reviewers pointed out the difference between Finney's and Ustinov's portrayal on the one hand and that of Suchet on the other by which they not only accepted Suchet in the role, they even stated that "...Suchet was already shaping up to offer the definitive portrayal of Poirot." (Aldridge 2016: 248) The history of adapting all Poirot stories into films during the two and half decades following 1988 was not a 'plain sailing' though. Not all the stories, either short stories or novels, are of the same quality and not all the films keep the same, high standard of craft. After about ten years of making Poirot films there came some productions which can be defined as weak - a feature which was not caused only by the makers but that can be attributed to weak original stories as well. Another reason for the unbalanced quality was that some signs began to show on the part of ITV of their losing confidence in the programme. However, the programme managed to retain its popularity with audiences thanks to the constant re-runs and "continued to sell well around the world." (Aldridge 2016: 266) It was this international success which helped "the revival of the series" (Aldridge 2016: 266) but it was not to be permanent as "[r]eviews demonstrated a tiredness with the production, some highlighting it as the latest example of a formulaic and cliché driven series." (Aldridge 2016: 268) The near failure with audiences of the adaptation of one of Christie's best novels, *Evil Under the Sun*, confirms the troubles, "indicating that even when adapting one of the more iconic mysteries the programme was struggling to make an impact." (Aldridge 2016: 268) It was evident that the approach had to be changed. There is no arguing about the makers' greatest effort put

into making high quality adaptations of the stories written by the author whose status within literature, however underestimated several decades before, has been firmly secured. It has already been mentioned that not all Christie's stories retain the same quality standard and many experts looking into Dame Agatha's legacy agree that it is particularly the works coming from her later years which lose the original drive while the best ones tend to be those coming from the 1920s and 1930s. So when the adaptors at last decided to film all Poirot stories they were facing a real challenge of retaining the standards and trying to eliminate the shortcomings to maximum level. That they were not always entirely successful is only natural. What they did manage to achieve, however, was the global success of the programme and David Suchet in the leading role found himself in the position of an actor whom viewers began to identify with his character. It is then no exaggeration to claim that the makers of this colossal achievement managed to make the character which was mere creation of one creative mind into a phenomenon that has become a symbol of pop-culture worldwide. At this point it remains to try to answer two questions – Why Poirot? Why not Miss Marple? One, very pragmatic, reason is that there are considerably fewer Miss Marple stories than those featuring Poirot. It is interesting then to observe that the most recent adaptations of Miss Marple stories comprise also stories which originally do not feature the character of the 'nosy spinster' (e.g. *Towards Zero*, *Why didn't They Ask Evans?*) Another, perhaps equally important reason is that given by Julian Symons who sees it in "the supremacy of the best Poirot stories over the rest of what [Christie] wrote." (Symons 1972: 56) Agatha Christie's Poirot was being made and ran for twenty-five years. Naturally, the supposed general feeling after a quarter of a century would be that of tiredness, boredom, even irritation with having to follow the same character repeatedly. However, the developments of the last few years prove quite the opposite. In 2015, over a quarter of a century since its last adaptation, the BBC offered "a distinctive and largely faithful"

(Aldridge 2016: 339) new adaptation of the novel *And Then There Were None*. And it looks as if the BBC, encouraged by its success have decided to continue in this tendency by adapting, so far, *Witness for the Prosecution*, *The ABC Murders* or *Ordeal by Innocence*. Another attempt at 'reviving' Poirot and bringing him back to the cinema screens is the most recent one by Kenneth Branagh in *Murder on the Orient Express* (2017). This latest adaptation had one striking effect upon viewers – it managed to divide them almost strictly into two groups – those who love it and those who hate it. The reason for this disagreement is relatively easy to identify. The first group comprises those who love Branagh's version of the mystery. They mostly fall into the category of the young, i.e. those who are not that well acquainted with Christie's literary work, more particularly with Poirot stories and, very probably, with the iconic ITV programme. As falling mostly in the younger age category they definitely appreciate the attempt at action and making the story more up-to-date and closer to the demands of pop-culture. And then there is the category of devout Christie and Poirot fans who do mind the action and the ridiculing of Poirot, an aspect the entire Christie Estate had originally been so much against. In his publication Aldridge refers to earlier attempts at adapting Dame Agatha's stories stating that

... the rights to film Poirot stories had been purchased as a recognizable and marketable commodity associated with his name and general character, rather than due to any particular keenness to exploit the details of Christie's intricate mysteries. (Aldridge 2016: 21)

the words that are easily applicable to the most recent attempts.

### **Conclusions**

The popularity of detective fiction seems to be unceasing. Throughout its history it has come a long way, survived the contempt from the advocates of the so called 'high-brow' literature, enjoyed love

of readers and managed to achieve the status equal to that of quality literature. Agatha Christie definitely largely contributed to this process with her mysteries featuring one of – if not the one – best literary detectives. She, as the undeniably leading figure in this world holds firmly her position despite the critical words by her fellow writer, P. D James who claims that “Agatha Christie ... was not an innovative writer and had no interest in exploring the possibilities of the genre.” (James 2009: 87) However, this statement can be contradicted by another undeniable truth that “Christie’s appeal ... is universal, cutting across every possible barrier of race, colour, class and intelligence. (Barnard 1980: 4) When James gives her personal opinion on Christie’s work, she simply emphasises, perhaps unconsciously, the biggest difference between the two. The world of James’ novels is as close to the real world as possible whereas as she points out “[o]ne of the secrets of [Christie’s] universal and enduring appeal is that it excludes all disturbing emotions; those are for the real world from which we are escaping.” (James 2009: 86-7) Christie’s stories might be seen by some, particularly the young, as old-fashioned, outdated, even slow and boring and yet, they retain their power and influence, the status largely helped by the unceasing interest in making new adaptations of her works. Some of the adaptations stick to the traditional approaches, “[t]raditional...British crime/detective television has sustained its popularity... [and i]t is clear that the appetite ... for the more orthodox detective fiction format ... is still ravenous.” (McCaw 2012: 129), while the others are more open to innovative approach. Regardless of what approach one is an advocate of, the character that helps to keep the popularity alive is Hercule Poirot who “... has justly earned his place as the best-known detective in the twentieth century crime fiction.” (Barnard 1980: 98) The goings-on in the world of modern show-business underline the tendency towards experiment - to try new possibilities, new creative approaches and to constantly look for the ideas that would attract as many viewers as possible, more particularly among the young, regardless of what is

left of the original in the end. It is therefore obvious that the never ending disagreement between traditionalists and innovators will go on and that it does not necessarily have to concern exclusively the story and the plot. Even literary characters can become icons and even they can be altered in accordance with the wishes and ideas of adaptors and target audiences regardless of their privileged status.

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**Katarína Brziaková**

**affiliation:** Department of English and American Studies, Faculty of Arts,  
Comenius University, Bratislava

**position:** PhD professor's assistant

**email:** brziakova@uniba.sk

**research interests:** British Literature of the 19th–21st Centuries; British History and Cultural Studies; language teaching

**Selected publications:**

- (2018): "Social and Personal Paradoxes and Their Impact on the Lives of the Protagonists of Mrs Gaskell's Novel *Wives and Daughters*" (Katarína Brziaková), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, no. 23/2018, pp. 51–70.
- (2017): "The Struggle between the Traditional and the Progressive, the Old and the New in Jane Austen's Novel *Persuasion*" (Katarína Brziaková), in *Cultural Perspectives. Journal for Literary and British Cultural Studies in Romania*, no. 22/2017, pp. 65–84.
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