CHAPTER III
HISTORICAL-BIOGRAPHICAL APPROACH (CONTINUED)
Biographical Approach:

Agatha Christie was definitely “a product of what Nature i.e. her environment (national, local and familial) and History, or the sum total of social inheritance to which she was heir, had made her” (Fitzgibbon 39). “To know Agatha’s novels is to know Agatha the person, because…those things which were important to her, inevitably, found their way into her writings” (Norman 135).

Assertively Christie proclaimed that to her writing was simply an outlet for her creative urge which can be expressed in various other forms like cooking, embroidery, painting and music to name a few. She describes her haphazard technique of writing as:

You start into it, inflamed by an idea, full of hope, full indeed of confidence….There has to be one delicious moment when you have thought of something, know just how you are going to write it….You then get into difficulties, don’t see your way out, and finally manage to accomplish, though losing confidence all the time. Having finished it, you know that it is absolutely rotten. A couple of months later you wonder whether it may not be all right after all. (Christie, Autobiography 209)

Agatha did not regard herself as a professional author. Middle and upper class women hardly ever took up professions, though all that changed in the aftermath of the World Wars. Writing was something she had taken up for pleasure and if, at the same time; it fetched money too, what fun indeed! It was only after her divorce from
Archie, as a single mother, that it became imperative that she should take up writing as a profession as she had already started making a name for herself with her few published books.

What had propelled her on the course of writing a detective novel in the first place was her sister Madge’s challenge, “I bet you couldn’t” (Christie, *Autobiography* 217). The urge to prove her sister wrong manifested itself in the form of her first attempt at detective fiction, which after suffering rejection at the hands of a long time of publishers, was finally published by the Bodley Head as *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920. This marked the beginning of the existence of ‘The great - The unique!’ Hercule Poirot, the world renowned Belgian detective, who would one day become so acclaimed that even the sedate New York Times published a front page obituary of Hercule Poirot, when he appeared for the very last time in *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case*, wherein he meets his death. Poirot is the only fictional character to have received such an honour.

Poirot was modelled by Agatha, after giving much thought to the matter, on some Belgian refugees living in the nearby parish of Tor:

Why not make my detective a Belgian? I thought….How about a refugee police officer? A retired police officer….He should have been an inspector, so that he would have a certain knowledge of crime. He would be meticulous, very tidy, I thought to myself, as I cleared away a good many untidy odds and ends in my own bedroom. A tidy little man. I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square instead of round. And he should be very brainy – he should have little grey cells of the mind -
that was a good phrase….He would have a rather grand name….How about calling my little man Hercules….I don’t know why I settled on the name Poirot….It went well not with Hercules but Hercule - Hercule Poirot. (Christie, Autobiography 263-264)

On the faith and suggestion of her mother Clara, Christie went away to a hotel in Dartmoor for a fortnight to complete her book. Thus both Madge and Clara can be regarded as “the main catalysts to Agatha becoming a writer” (Norman 38).

Though consciously she tried to make the mythical Poirot markedly different from the ‘tall and agile’ Sherlock Holmes, who was based on a real person Dr Joseph Bell, yet there are certain points of resemblances between them that cannot be denied. “Who could I have as a detective? I reviewed such detectives as I had met and admired in books. There was Sherlock Holmes, the one and only – I should never be able to emulate him” (Christie, Autobiography 263).

Captain Hastings was the stooge to Poirot’s vanity and brilliance, as Dr Watson was to Sherlock Holmes. Poirot was fascinated by the “genuine Russian aristocrat, an aristocrat to her fingertips….What a sumptuous creature - Bird of Paradise - a Venus…..Countess Vera Rossakoff” (Christie, One, Two, Buckle My Shoe 227). Holmes was attracted to Irene Adler, though the passions of both remained unfulfilled. Poirot frequently out witted inspector Japp of Scotland Yard as Holmes had to contend with Inspector Lestrade. Poirot’s mythical brother Achilles reminds one of Sherlock Holmes’s real brother Mycroft. Thus Christie’s ambition to remain unaffected by Conan Doyle’s creation, was not wholly successful and there is a “remarkable parallelism between the two celebrated detectives” (“Elementary, my dear Hastings”).
One more resolution taken by Christie was that she had “decided once and for all that it is no good thinking about real people - you must create your characters for yourself. Someone you see in a tram or a restaurant is a possible starting point because you can make up something for yourself about them” (Christie, *Autobiography* 262). However the character of Miss Jane Marple, as the old spinsterish lady, a resident of the small English village of St Mary Mead, seems to have echoes of Christie’s paternal grandmother, Margaret Miller, whom she called ‘Auntie - Grannie’ and her friends at Ealing, who always expected the worst and were often proved right. Agatha explained later, that the surname was derived from ‘Marple Hall’ where she went with Madge to attend a sale. Auntie-Grannie’s dictums to Agatha are enumerated as “‘Always think the worst about people’; ‘Gentlemen need attention and three proper meals a day’; ‘Never get into a train with a single man’; ‘Gentlemen can be very agreeable but you can’t trust one of them’” (L.Thompson 25) which seem to have crawled into her work through old spinsterish characters like Miss Percehouse in *The Sittaford Mystery*, Miss Peabody in *Dumb Witness* and Miss Caroline Sheppard in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. It was the latter character of Miss Sheppard who is portrayed as an “acidulated spinster, full of curiosity, knowing everything, hearing everything; the complete detective service in the home” (Christie, *Autobiography* 448) which eventually culminated in the form of the famous Christie sleuth Miss Jane Marple, who made her debut in the short stories *The Tuesday Night Club* and then in the full length novel *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Miss Marple is often heard to proclaim, “The great thing to avoid is having in any way a trustful mind….oh yes, I always believe the worst. What is so sad is that one is usually justified in doing so” (Christie, *A Pocket Full of Rye* 146).
Christie airs her own grievances as an author through her brainchild Mrs Ariadne Oliver, the author figure, who appears in several of her works. In *Cards on the Table*, she seems to be reflecting Agatha’s views when she explains the process of literary creation, “One actually has to think, you know. And thinking is always such a bore. And you have to plan things. And then one gets stuck every now and then, and then you think you’ll never get out of the mess - but you do! Writing’s not particularly enjoyable. It’s hard work like everything else” (131).

Christie herself confessed that “the disappointing truth is that I haven’t much method….The real work is done in thinking out the development of your story and worrying about it until it comes right. That may take quite a while” (qtd. in Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks* 67). It is believed that Christie worked wherever and whenever she could, in her innumerable ‘note books’, with plots of one book confined not to one, but to several of them simultaneously. Ariadne Oliver expresses this sentiment in *Dead Man’s Folly*, “I mean, what can you say about how you write your books? What I mean is, first you’ve got to think of something, and then when you’ve thought of it you’ve got to force yourself to sit down and write it. That’s all” (qtd. in Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks* 66).

Christie was forced to acknowledge the bitter truth in her youth that no matter how hard she tried, she would never become a professional pianist and later on in life, analysed quite dispassionately: “There are people who can perform in public much better than they perform in private; and there are people who are just the opposite. I was one of the latter. It is obvious that I chose the right career. The most blessed things about being an author is that you do it in private and in your own time….You do not have to stand up and make a fool of yourself in public” (Christie,
Autobiography 158). Her mouthpiece Mrs Oliver, also opines, “What a mistake for an author to emerge from her secret fastness. Authors were shy unsociable creatures, atoning for their lack of social aptitude by inventing their own companions and conversations” (Christie, Mrs McGinty’s Dead 127). In her own life, Christie agreed to be the President of The Detection Club (another name for The Crime Club mentioned earlier) from 1958 to 1976 “on the understanding that she would never have to give a speech” (Curran, Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks 60).

Like Christie, Mrs Oliver has created a foreign detective Sven Hjerson, the Finn. Mrs Oliver expresses her discontent with her creation:

How do I know why I ever thought of the revolting man? I must have been mad! Why a Finn when I know nothing about Finland? Why a vegetarian? Why all the idiotic mannerisms he’s got? These things just happen. You try something - and people seem to like it - and then you go on - and before you know where you are you’ve got someone like that maddening Sven Hjerson tied to you for life. And people even write and say how fond you must be of him. Fond of him? If I met that bony, gangling, vegetable – eating Finn in real life, I’d do a better murder than I’ve ever invented. (Christie, Mrs McGinty’s Dead 201)

Christie’s own relationship with Poirot has been expressed as:

Why, why, did I ever invent this detestable, bombastic tiresome little creature? Eternally straightening things, forever boasting, always twirling his moustaches and tilting his ‘egg-shaped head’....Yes, there have been moments when I have disliked M. Hercule Poirot very much indeed – when I have rebelled bitterly against being yoked to
him for life….But now, I must confess it, Hercule Poirot has won. A reluctant affection has sprung up for him. He has become more human, less irritating. I admire certain things about him – his passion for the truth, his understanding of human frailty and his kindliness. (qtd. in Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Murder in the Making* 185-187)

Christie mocks her own innate talent of creating murder mysteries through the fertile imagination of Mrs Oliver, “What really matters is plenty of bodies! If the thing’s getting a little dull, some more blood cheers it up….When I count up I find I’ve only written thirty thousand words instead of sixty thousand, and so then I have to throw in another murder….” (qtd. in Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks* 158).

In her autobiography, Christie demonstrated her artistic technique as a painful, enslaving, preoccupying process over which she had no control whatsoever:

There is always, of course, that terrible three weeks, or a month, which you have to get through when you are trying to get started on a book. There is no agony like it….You forget every time what you felt before when it comes again. Such misery and despair, such inability to do anything that will be in the least creative. And yet it seems that this particular phase of misery has got to be lived through…then for some unknown reason, an inner ‘starter’ gets you off at the post. You begin to function, you know then that ‘it’ is coming, the mist is clearing up….you haven’t done anything at all yet, but you are – triumphantly there. (491)
The Hollow shows the sculptress, Henrietta Savernake, say “Sculpture isn’t a thing you set out to do and succeed in. It’s a thing that gets at you, that nags at you - and haunts you - so that you’ve got, sooner or later, to make terms with it. And then for a bit, you get some peace - until the whole thing starts over again” (Christie 90).

Despite Christie’s protestations of not including any real people in her work some exceptions to this are visible in the form of the following characters. Major Belcher was the employer of Archie Christie (Agatha’s first husband), who appointed the latter as the financial advisor of the British Empire Mission, which gave the Christie’s a chance to go round the world for a year, which they could not resist. On Belcher’s request Agatha put him as Sir Eustace Pedler, the villain in her novel The Man in the Brown Suit. She later accepted that Pedler “wasn’t Belcher, of course, but he used several of Belcher’s phrases, and told some of Belcher’s stories….It is, I think the only time I have tried to put a real person whom I knew well into a book, and I don’t think it succeeded” (Christie, Autobiography 321).

Again there are evidences to show that the above claim of Agatha does not portray the complete truth as some of her characters do reflect traits of her first husband, Archie Christie, though they may have cropped up unknowingly. About him, she writes in her autobiography, “He had the happy attitude of going through life without the least interest in what anyone thought of him or his belongings: his mind was always entirely bent on what he wanted himself” (qtd. in L.Thompson 82-83). Similarly, John Christow, in The Hollow is assessed as a man indifferent to others, “You don’t know - you don’t see - you’re curiously insensitive! You don’t know what other people are feeling and you’re - you’re like a searchlight. A powerful beam
turned onto the one spot where your interest is, and behind it and each side of it, darkness!” (Christie 109).

Laura Thompson also concedes, “The fiercely tormented David Hunter (*Taken at the Flood*); the lost boy Bryan Eastley (*4.50 from Paddington*)…they were all created by Agatha after 1945 and they all have something of Archie in them: they all knew what it was like to sleep and wake with death, to live with it as intimately as with a wife, then come home to a world that expects them to return, gratefully to their former selves” (101-102).

The character of Elinor in *Sad Cypress* can be seen as reflecting Agatha’s pain of betrayal when Elinor’s fiancé Roddy, falls inexplicably in love with another girl, somewhat similar to Archie’s action of falling for another woman, though she herself tries to excuse his conduct. “Oh, Elinor - I don’t know what’s the matter! I think I’m going mad. It happened when I saw her - that first day - in the wood…just her face - it - it’s turned everything upside down….” To which Elinor’s gentle reply is, “Love isn’t very reasonable….” (Christie 52).

Agatha’s brother, Monty, the ne’er do well son of the Miller family, was more or less one of “nature’s misfit” as was proved time and again. He had fought in the Boer War and later was invalidated from East Africa, and the burden of looking after his upkeep fell on his sisters, as long as he lived. “…. a woman came to call at the house one day,… Richards send shots to the right and left of her as she was going away, walking down the drive. She bolted like a hare, he said. He roared with laughter when he told us about it. I remember him saying her fat backside was quivering like a jelly” (Christie, *The Unexpected Guest* 23). Here Richards is an expression of Monty’s eccentricity displayed in a similar real life incident as recalled by Agatha in
her autobiography. “A slightly different arrangement of genes and he might have been a great man” is how she remembers him (qtd. in L.Thompson 53). Jacko Argyle, in *Ordeal by Innocence*, is a character who can be assessed in the same light as Monty “….Jacko, the intrinsic human being. Was Jacko, in the words of the old Calvinistic doctrine, ‘a vessel appointed for destruction’?…he was one of those who are born to go wrong. No environment could have helped him or saved him…‘One of Nature’s misfit’” (qtd. in L.Thompson 53).

Katherine Woolley, the wife of the archaeologist Leonard Woolley, whom Agatha encountered in her journeys East, comes across as a “temperamental woman, and she had a great facility either for putting people at their ease or for making them nervous….How wonderful to be the sort of woman who, as soon as she had made up her mind, had everybody within sight immediately falling in with it, not grudgingly, but as a matter of course” (Christie, *Autobiography* 403-404).

The tense atmosphere at the excavation site at Ur, where the Woolleys were residing, is effectively captured by Christie in *Murder in Mesopotamia* where Katherine is portrayed through Louise Leidner:

I can explain best what I mean by saying that they all passed the butter to each other a shade too politely.

Yes, there was something a little odd about it….

A shade formal…. (50)

Louise Leidner is described as “She causes quarrels!...Because she’s bored. She’s not an archaeologist, only the wife of one. She’s bored shut away from any
excitements and so she provides her own drama. She amuses herself by setting other people by the ears” (29). Max Mallowan, Agatha’s second husband, who was working with the Woolleys, comes alive in the form of David Emmot, “There was something about him that seemed very steadfast and reassuring in an atmosphere where one was uncertain what anyone was feeling or thinking” (Christie, Murder in Mesopotamia 80).

Agatha’s gratitude towards her wire haired terrier Peter, who sustained her through her most troubled period of divorce, can be seen in the fact that she made him the dedicatee as well as an important character in Dumb Witness. Agatha’s daughter Rosalind’s one time incompetent nanny ‘Cuckoo’, who “was a loving and kindly soul….but she mislaid everything, destroyed everything….and made remarks that were so stupid as to be scarcely credible” (qtd. in Norman 60) can be glimpsed in the character of Minnie Lawson, the paid companion to the elderly Miss Emily Arundell, who was one of “so many of these foolish, middle aged women to minister to her - all much the same, kind, fussy, subservient and almost entirely mindless” (Christie, Dumb Witness 26).

Christie was dismissed as the “slow one” of the Miller Family when compared to her quick witted and dramatic sister Madge and mother Clara. “Agatha is terribly slow!” was the constant refrain. Many years later this propelled Agatha to create the character of the dim witted Gerda in The Hollow who gets her own back at others by exaggerating her slowness:

She found her weapon of defence…Often, when she pretended not to understand, she did understand and often, deliberately, she slowed
down in her task of whatever it was, smiling to herself when someone’s impatient fingers snatched it away from her.

For, warm and delightful, was a secret knowledge of superiority. She began to be, quite often, a little amused. Yes, it was amusing to know more than they thought you knew. To be able to do a thing, but not let anybody know that you could do it….To feeling that you could hold your own and on equal terms with the world at large. (63-64)

Christie’s mother, Clara Boehmer, had been adopted by her mother’s wealthy sister Margaret Miller. In consequence, she was utterly sensitive and vulnerable, suffering from a feeling of being unwanted. This pain that formed a perpetual part of Clara’s existence is reflected in *Mrs McGinty’s Dead*:

There was a woman writing in the paper the other day….A really stupid letter. Asking what was best to do - to let your child be adopted by someone who could give it every advantage - every advantage, that’s what she said – and she meant a good education, and clothes and comfortable surroundings - or whether to keep it when you couldn’t give it advantages of any kind. I think that’s stupid - really stupid. If you can give a child enough to eat - that’s all that matters….I ought to know….I was an adopted child. My mother parted with me and I had every advantage, as they call it. And it’s always hurt - always - always - to know that you weren’t really wanted, that your mother could let you go….But what it boiled down to is that they can, really, get on without you… And it hurts. I wouldn’t give up my children- not for all the advantages in the world! (Christie 182)
Agatha though fond of her own mother and being herself such a dutiful daughter, yet had her own individual ideas about children and child rearing. Her own daughter Rosalind, was a spirited, sensible and independent child and though her practicality sometimes depressed Agatha’s sensitive and imaginative soul, yet she realized that a child’s existence is very much its own and doesn’t depend on the mother entirely. In her autobiography, she writes, “A child…is yours and yet is mysteriously a stranger…it is like a strange plant which you have brought home, planted, and can hardly wait to see how it will turn out” (qtd. in L.Thompson 122). In *Five Little Pigs*, the governess, Miss Williams says, “Many children, most children. I should say suffer from over attention on the part of their parents. There is too much love, too much watching over the child. It is uneasily conscious of this brooding, and seeks to free itself, to get away and be unobserved….The best thing for a child, I am convinced, is to have what I should term healthy neglect on the part of both its parents” (Christie 168).

Nor does Christie think that motherhood is a mantle that can simply be put on, nor is it to be regarded as a sacred job that one should excel in. In *Ordeal by Innocence*, Rachel Argyle is demonstrated as one who thinks she can make up for her inability to produce children by simply adopting some unfortunate ones to create her own family, with the result that it is her adopted son ‘Jacko’ who ultimately is responsible for her death. “They grew up regarding the Argyles as their father and mother. They were given the best education money could buy. If environment counts for anything they should have gone far. They certainly had every advantage” (Christie 49). But Christie concludes that an individual is the product of both environment and heredity, and both play a significant role in framing one’s ontology. Again and again she emphasized that motherhood should be a normal process altogether, and should
not be regarded as something full of virtue and beneficence, requiring the utmost devotion:

You’ve only got to look at any normal mother cat…she has her kittens, she’s passionately protective of them, she’ll scratch anyone who goes near them. And then, in a week or so, she starts resuming her own life. She goes out, hunts a bit, takes a rest from her young. She’ll still protect them if anyone attacks them, but she is no longer obsessed by them, all the time. She’ll play with them a bit, then when they’re a bit too rough, she’ll turn on them and give them a spank and tell them she wants to be let alone for a bit. She’s reverting, you see, to nature….I’ve seen many girls and women, with strong maternal instincts, keen on getting married but mainly, though they mayn’t quite know it themselves – because of their urge to motherhood. And the babies come; they’re happy and satisfied. Life goes back into proportion for them….The maternal instinct, in a purely physical sense, is satisfied, you see. *(Ordeal by Innocence)* 72

Home making was a passion with Christie. Starting with her childhood home Ashfield, all through her life she lived in different houses and different places. Her love of houses is scattered through her work and forms the setting in many of her books. ‘Abney Hall’ which was the ancestral residence of her sister Madge’s husband, James Watt, and where Agatha was often invited to spend Christmas, is featured in *After the Funeral* where the young cook calls it disparagingly as a ‘proper old mausoleum’ and in *They Do It With Mirrors* as Stony Gates, which is mischievously described as a “sort of Gothic monstrosity….Best Victorian Lavatory period” (qtd. in
L. Thompson 44). When Christie started her married life with Archie in London, she got an opportunity to indulge in her new passion of house hunting and collecting houses. This eventually, many years later after her divorce and re-marriage, culminated in her possessing about half a dozen houses at one time, the most loved ones being Winterbrook House at Wallingford, Greenway House and 48, Sheffield Terrace. However, during the Second World War, Greenway was taken over by the Admiralty, Wallingford was filled up with evacuees and 48, Sheffield Terrace was bombed up.

Winterbrook House bought at the end of 1934 was what she called ‘Max’s house’ which featured in *Dumb Witness*, and *Ordeal by Innocence* mirrors the fate of Wallingford as it shows the war nursery built by Rachel Argyle during the war. But the house of her dreams was ‘Greenway House’, “That magical white box set above the gleaming Dart, Greenway, with its wild romantic gardens; Greenway, rooted in its Devon history and yet, with its ghostly pallor, looking as if it might at any moment vanish into the air” (L. Thompson 309). This formed the setting in *Five Little Pigs* where a murder takes place in the battery, and *Dead Man’s Folly* where the little, out of the way, boathouse becomes the scene of murder. The house at Sunning Dale, which Archie and herself called ‘Styles’ features in *A Pocket Full of Rye* as Yewtree Lodge.

How houses can be the symbol of ultimate obsession is shown in *Endless Night*, where the character Mike Rogers, belonging to the lower class of English society, dreams of obtaining ‘The Tower’ and all that it stands for, as the height of his ambition. Gwenda in *Sleeping Murder* reflects Christie’s love of house decorating, at which she had become something of an expert, due to changing houses so often.
When Gwenda buys her own house, her attempts at setting house have been described as:

Some of her old furniture fitted in nicely and was in harmony with the house. There were small gay papier-mache tables in the drawing room, inlaid with mother-of-pearl and painted with castles and roses. There was a prim little work table with a gathered sack underneath of pure silk, there was a rose wood bureau and a mahogany sofa table.

The so-called easy chairs Gwenda, had relegated to various bedrooms and had bought two large squashy wells of comfort for herself and Giles to stand each side of the fireplace. The large chesterfield sofa was placed near the windows. For curtains, Gwenda had chosen old-fashioned chintz of pale egg-shell blue with prim urns of roses and yellow birds on them. The room, she now considered, was exactly right. (14-15)

Though her childhood home Ashfield, had to be sold off due to the unavoidable circumstances, it was the thoughts of Ashfield she turned to, for consolation in her old age because she had spent a very happy and sheltered childhood there. “‘I remember, the house where I was born…’ I go back to that always in my mind. Ashfield….It is always Ashfield, the old familiar setting where one’s life first functioned,” (Christie, Autobiography 548). The Postern of Fate, her last book is full of reminiscences of Ashfield. ‘The Laurels’ seems to be Ashfield come alive. Her childhood friends Mathilde (the rocking house), Truelove (the horse cart) and K.K. (the green house) all find mention in the book. Further, she also mentions the names of her favourite books which she devoured as a child, which include “Androcles and
the Lion, Mrs Molesworth, The Cuckoo Clock, Four Winds Farm” (10-11), “The Tapestry Room, Alice Through the Looking Glass, Unknown to History and The Daisy Chain” (15-16) and “One’s first introduction, really, to the romantic novel, The Prisoner of Zenda” (17).

Even the names of the streets that she traversed in her childhood Devon, became the names of characters like “Eleanor Vansittart, Colonel Luscombe, John Christow, Jean Instow and Mildred Street” (L.Thompson 41). Meadowbanks, the famous girls’ school in Cat Among the Pigeons features Rosalind’s school Beneden. After her divorce from Archie, Christie started travelling to the Middle East, and after her second marriage to Max Mallowan, the archaeologist, it became a second home to her. This resulted in many of her books being written against the Middle Eastern background like *Murder in Mesopotamia, Murder on the Orient Express* and *Death on the Nile*. On the suggestion of Stephen Glanville, Professor of Egyptian Archaeology and Philology at University College, London (1935-1946), Agatha wrote *Death Comes as the End* which is a detective novel set in Ancient Egypt in the year 2000 BC. Even the bungalow purchased by Agatha and Madge, to house their wayward brother Monty on his return from Africa, in Dartmoor forms the background of *The Sittaford Mystery*.

In 1915, on the outbreak of the First World War, Agatha started work in Torquay’s Hospital Dispensary. After passing the Apothecaries Hall Examination, and firmly ensconced in this environment, surrounded by poisons, she started work on her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Even in the Second World War she worked as a hospital dispenser which firmly cemented her knowledge of poisons which she put to good use in her work. Strychnine was the poison she employed in
her first novel and thereafter “she uses not just the usual poisons –arsenic (*Murder is Easy*), morphine (*Hickory Dickory Dock*), cyanide (*Sparkling Cyanide*), but also the more esoteric – nicotine (*Three Act Tragedy*), thallium (*The Pale House*) and taxine (*A Pocket Full of Rye*)” (Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Murder in the Making* 323).

Infact, Christie’s *The Pale Horse* became the operative factor in saving a child’s life in actuality. A year and a half old dying girl had been brought to a London hospital from Qatar, as a last attempt to save her, but the doctors were unable to diagnose the disease. However, Nurse Martha Maitland, who was reading Christie’s *The Pale Horse* at that time, co-related the loss of hair of the girl with that of the victims in the novel, which was due to thallium poisoning. After performing certain tests, the doctors on the suggestion of the nurse, also arrived at the same conclusion, so that within a period of three weeks the child was well on her way to getting better and four months later she went back to Qatar, hale and hearty once again. Thus Christie, even after her death, proved instrumental in helping a child to survive.

The *Washington Post*, June 24, 1977 reported the British paediatrician-in-charge commenting that “Thallium is so rare that no one in this country would think of testing for it”. However “Pharmacologist Agatha Christie had posthumously saved a life” (Fitzgibbon 31) which would have given her a great pleasure had she come to know about it.

When five years old and travelling in France with her family, Christie came across that brand new mode of travel - The Automobiles, for the first time. When after marriage, she bought a ‘grey bottle nosed Morris-Cowley’ on the suggestion of Archie, she regarded it as one of the high points of her existence” (Christie,
Autobiography 331). Henrietta Savernake in The Hollow reflects Christie’s love of cars:

Can’t you feel the way it wants to go - it wants to slide in - keep your hand flat till you get the feeling of it – don’t just push it anywhere - feel it….Henrietta smiled. She shot away down the Mews, savouring the unfailing pleasure she always felt when setting off in a car alone. She much preferred to be alone when driving. In that way she could realize to the full the intimate personal enjoyment that driving a car brought to her. (Christie 82-83)

After the birth of Rosalind, Agatha blissfully enmeshed in her married life, went on a world tour, with Archie as the financial advisor of the British Empire Mission, organized by his old schoolmaster at Clifton, Major Belcher. Even though it was ‘a terrible risk’ to throw up Archie’s safe city job, the Christies were keen to take the risk “…. If you can’t take the risk of doing something you want, when the chances come, life isn’t worth living….And now we were determined to see the world and risk what would happen on our return” (Christie, Autobiography 371). Even after agreeing to marry Max Mallowan, Christie realized she was risking her happiness a second time round. “Well, it is my risk, but I believe it is worth taking a risk to find a person with whom you are happy” (Christie, Autobiography 432). John Christow in The Hollow, also echoes this sentiment. “And he didn’t, definitely he didn’t, want to lose anything. All his life he had been a man who took a justifiable number of risks. Risks with patients, risks with treatment, risks with investments. Never a fantastic risk, only the kind of risk that was just beyond the margin of safety” (Christie 122).
Christie has often been blamed for her English snobbery which sometimes materializes as prejudice against foreigners. She describes Oliver Manders in *Three Act Tragedy* as “A handsome young fellow, twenty-five at a guess. Something, perhaps, a little sleek about his good looks. Something else – something - was it foreign? Something unEnglish about him….“Oliver-you slippery Shylock” - of course… that’s it – not foreign - Jew!” (21-22). In the same strain, *Murder in Mesopotamia* shows the local Arab boys described as:

It was the workmen that made me laugh. You never saw such a lot of scarecrows – all in long petticoats and rags, and their heads tied up as though they had toothache….I noticed that most of their eyes were terrible – All covered with discharge and one or two looked half blind. I was just thinking what a miserable lot they were when Dr Leidner said, ‘Rather a fine- looking lot of men, aren’t they?’ And I thought what a queer world it was and how two different people could see the same thing each of them the other way round. (Christie 71)

Even her successful book *Ten Little Niggers* was renamed by the publishers as *And Then There Were None* which then went on to become highly acclaimed.

However, Christie never willfully or consciously gave in to such a prejudice. She deliberately made her detective a foreigner, a Belgian, and if she would have been racist, then Hercule Poirot would have been born British. Rather, through Poirot, she sometimes takes a dig at the English foibles and thus it is wrong to label her as xenophobic. “But, my friend, to speak the broken English is an enormous asset. It leads people to despise you. They say a foreigner, he can’t even speak English properly…also I boast! An Englishman he says often, “A fellow who thinks as much
of himself as that cannot be worth much.” That is the English point of view. It is not at all true” (Christie, *Three Act Tragedy* 223).

“The miserable John Bull who shares it with me is away attending to his master. At last he comes back - very long face as usual. He will not talk - says yes and no. A miserable race, the English- not sympathetic” (Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* 191). “Not so, you think, would an English Inquiry be conducted. There everything would be cut and dried - it would be all kept to the facts – a well ordered business” (Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* 197). When Colonel Arbuthnot vouches for Miss Debenhams’s integrity by calling her a ‘pukka sahib’, Poirot elaborates the remark as “It means….that Miss Debenhams’s father and brothers were at the same kind of school as Colonel Arbuthnot” (Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express* 177) which ironically meant that it counted for nothing in the investigation of crime, but was foolishly considered as a mark of respectability by the English. Poirot compliments Miss Debenham on being “very Anglo Saxon” (196) in not displaying any emotion. Also Mary Cavendish in Christie’s *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* exclaims that “to have Jewish blood was by no means a disadvantage, as ‘it leavens the stolid stupidity of the ordinary Englishman’” (qtd. in Norman 160).

Christie’s *The Secret of Chimneys* is regarded as a ‘snobbish book’ which contains the oft- quoted dialogue “I certainly knew her face quite well - In that vague way one does know governesses and companions and people one sits opposite to in trains. It's awful, but I never really look at them properly. Do you?” (qtd. in L.Thompson 144). This should not be regarded as high handedness on Christie’s part but a sad truth that we shy away from. Rather, she was really appreciative of the highly trained domestic staff. “One of the things I think I should miss most, if I were
a child nowadays, would be the absence of servants. To a child they were the most
colourful part of daily life….They knew their place, as was said, but knowing their
place meant not subservience but pride, the pride of the professional” (Christie,
*Autobiography* 28). The children were instilled with values that, “Servants must be
treated with the utmost courtesy…you must be polite to people whose position forbids
them to be rude to you. If you are impolite, they will despise you, and rightly, because
you have not acted like a lady” (Christie, *Autobiography* 29).

In *Three Act Tragedy*, Beatrice Church, the upper house maid describes the
impoverished genteel lady Mary Lytton Gore as “A very nice lady….Poor she may
be, but you can see she’s someone and so considerate, never giving trouble and
always speaking so pleasant” whereas she holds contrary views on Miss Muriel Wills
“Well, she wasn’t quite the “class” of the others, sir. She couldn’t help it….But she
did things a real lady wouldn’t have done. She pried, if you know what I mean, sir,
poked and pried about” (Christie 78-79).

Being a ‘lady’ was what girls aspired to, even though some of the values they
had to imbibe, now appear a little quaint in our eyes. “‘Always leave something on
your plate for lady Manners. (Never drink with your mouth full)…. ‘Put on clean
underclothes when you are going on a railway journey in case there should be an
accident.’” (Christie, *Autobiography* 28-29). The most crucial things that all ladies
abstained from, was showing their emotions in public. This was something that was
simply ‘not done’. “But I never showed my feelings. We were taught that as girls - a
most valuable training. That, I always think, is where breeding tells” (Christie,
*Murder is Easy* 204).
Occasionally Christie also dabbled in the supernatural which can be seen in many of her works like *The Sittaford Mystery*, *Taken at the Flood*, *Dumb Witness* and many other short stories. But she always had an explanation behind it, and treats it often in a mocking vein. The séance in *The Sittaford Mystery* is shown to be manipulated by the murderer to his own advantage. The ‘halo’ seen behind Miss Arundell when attending her last séance in *Dumb Witness* does not have any symbolic significance but was the result of phosphorus poisoning which made her breath phosphorescent on the night in question. Further Mrs Katharine Cloade in *Taken at the Flood* comes across as a rather silly woman who deals with the ‘Ouija board’. When she visits Poirot she tries to defend her spiritualistic faith by renouncing doctors and science:

‘Doctors I find, have a very materialistic outlook. The spiritual seems to be strangely hidden from them. They pin their faith on science - but what I say is….What is science - what can it do?’

There seemed, to Hercule Poirot, to be no answer to the question other than a meticulous and painstaking description embracing Pasteur, Lister, Humphry Davy’s safety lamp - the convenience of electricity in the home and several hundred other kindred items. (7)

Thus Christie establishes the superiority of science over the dubious spiritual realms. However many of her short stories do end ambiguously leaving the reader suspended between belief and non belief in the supernatural. Perhaps this was an influence on Christie of “Conan Doyle’s enthusiasm for spiritualism” (Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Murder in the Making* 151).
Agatha Christie makes a casual reference to her contemporary crime writers in her works. Conan Doyle is mentioned in *The Sittaford Mystery* and Dorothy Sayers, Dickson Carr, H.C. Bailey and herself find a mention in *The Body in the Library*. In *The Clocks*, Poirot dispassionately analyses several famous detective novels like:

The Leavenworth Case, The Adventures of Arsene Lupin, The Mystery of the Yellow Room, The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes. He goes on to discuss a number of authors, some of whom, although fictional, are identifiable - Cyril Quain with his attention to detail and unbreakable alibis is Freeman Wills Croft, Louisa O’ Malley with her milieu of brownstone mansion in New York is Elizabeth Daly. Florence Elks is more difficult to identify but is perhaps Margaret Millar, a writer Christie admired. (qtd. in Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Murder in the Making* 336)

Real life murderers are also alluded to in Christie’s works. Lizzie Borden is reminded of in *Elephants Can Remember*, *They Do it with Mirrors* and *Five Little Pigs*. Lizzie was tried for the murder of her parents Mr and Mrs Andrew Borden in 1892 in Fall River, Massachusetts but was acquitted due to lack of evidence. *Elephants Can Remember* and *Nemesis* have reflection of Constance Kent who killed her three year old half brother on June 13, 1860. *The Clocks* mention the Crippen Case and *Mrs McGinty’s Dead* has a character Eva Crane in the form of Ethel Le Neve, who was supposed to be the partner of the infamous Dr Crippen, who murdered his wife and buried the body in the cellar. *Third Girl* and *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* are evocative of the Bravo case wherein Charles Bravo died four months after marrying Florence Ricardo due to poisoning. The ‘Brides in the Bath’
murderer Joseph Smith, who drowned three of his wives, is found in the character of Tim Kendal in *A Caribbean Mystery* (Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks* 191-194).

Christie held very rigid views on crime and criminals which she expresses quite candidly in her autobiography:

> I can suspend judgment on those who kill - but I think they are evil for the community, they bring in nothing except hate, and take from it all that they can. I am willing to believe that they are made that way, that they are born with a disability, for which, perhaps, one should pity them, but even then, I think, not spare them….It frightens me that nobody seems to care about the innocent….Nobody seems to go through the agony of the *victim* - they are only full of pity for the young killer, because of his youth.

> Why should they not execute him?....What can we do to those who are tainted with the germs of ruthlessness and hatred, for whom other people’s lives go for nothing? They are often the ones with good homes, good opportunities, good teaching, yet they turn out to be, in plain English, *wicked*. (453-454)

Elvira Blake in *At Bertram’s Hotel*, the young people in *Third Girl* and the millionaire’s son Michael Rafiel in *Nemesis* are such unsatisfactory modern day youngsters that are found in her later works. In *Passenger to Frankfurt*, that came out in the year of her eightieth birthday, Christie “gravitated towards themes of global terror, the growth of evil, the increase in violence for its own sake” (L.Thompson 468).
Her entire sympathy lay entirely on the side of the innocent. “The innocent must be protected; they must be able to live at peace and charity with their neighbours….The important thing is still the innocent; those who live sincerely and fearlessly in the present age, who demand that they should be protected and saved from harm. They are the ones that matter” (Christie, *Autobiography* 453-455). Hercule Poirot proclaims again and again, “Yes, we are all human beings….I am concerned with the lives of private individuals who have the right not to have their lives taken from them” (Christie, *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* 289-290).

Miss Marple exclaims, “Wickedness shouldn’t triumph” (Christie, *A Pocket Full of Rye* 315) and justifies capital punishment when she says “Really, I feel quite pleased to think of him (the murderer) being hanged” (Christie, *Body in the Library* 214). *Ordeal by Innocence* has Dr Calgary state “….And the innocent should not suffer. Only the guilty…what I have done has not served the cause of justice. It has not brought conviction to the guilty. It has not delivered the innocent from the shadow of guilt….” (Christie 47).

Christie may be termed ‘anti-feminist’ by today’s standards as she held typical Victorian views about the working of women:

The position of women, over the years, has definitely changed for the worse. We women have behaved like mugs. We have clamoured to be allowed to work as men work. Men, not being fools, have taken kindly to the idea. Why support a wife? What’s wrong with a wife supporting herself?...

You’ve got to hand it to Victorian women; they got their men folk, where they wanted them. They established their frailty, delicacy,
sensibility - their constant need of being protected and cherished. Did they lead miserable, servile lives, downtrodden and oppressed?....All my grandmother’s friends seem to me in retrospect singularly resilient and almost invariably successful in getting their own way. They were tough, self-willed, and remarkably well read and well-informed. (Christie, Autobiography 134)

What is more ironical is that, for a woman who made such a name for herself, by her talent for writing and the hard work she put into her books, with “a career spanning more than 55 years and two world wars” (Curran, Agatha Christie’s Murder in the Making 23), she was all out for the “pleasures of idleness” as she terms it. She recalls her father, in an interview in 1969, as “a gentleman of substance, and never did a hand’s turn in his life, and he was a most agreeable man….I cannot see what is morally right about working” (qtd. in L.Thompson 15). In her book The Moving Finger, the central character Jerry Burton, displays a photograph of his favourite Chinese picture which “represents an old man sitting beneath a tree playing cat’s cradle with a piece of string on his fingers and toes…It is called ‘Old Man enjoying the Pleasure of Idleness’” (114). It was a deep rooted conviction with Agatha that to really attain the pleasures of idleness we have to reach “a very high state of civilization….A fine point of sophistication” (Christie, The Moving Finger 114). As she states in her autobiography, “Presumably little Georgie Stephenson was enjoying idleness when he observed his mother’s tea-kettle lid rising and falling….I don’t think necessity is the mother of invention, in my opinion, it arises directly from idleness, possibly also from laziness. To save oneself trouble. That is the big secret....” (134). The very same sentiment, although couched in different terms, finds way in The Moving Finger also:
Sir Edward Grey….afterwards our foreign minister, was sent down from Oxford for incorrigible idleness. The Duke of Wellington….was both dull and inattentive at his books. And has it ever occurred to you….that you would probably not be able to take a good express train to London if little Georgie Stephenson had been out with his youth movement instead of lolling about, bored, in his mother’s kitchen until the curious behaviour of the kettle lid attracted the attention of his idle mind?

It is a theory of mine….that we owe most of our great inventions and most of the achievements of genius to idleness – either enforced or voluntary. The human mind prefers to be spoon-fed with the thoughts of others, but deprived of such nourishment it will, reluctantly, begin to think for itself – and such thinking, remember, is original thinking and may have valuable results. (Christie 110)

Christie’s religion, her creed, her faith are mirrored in her joy of living as her thoughts that have been penned down in her autobiography proclaim:

Always when I woke up, I had the feeling which I am sure must be natural to all of us, a joy in being alive. I don’t say you feel it consciously - you don’t - but there you are, you are alive, and you open your eyes, and here is another day; another step, as it were, on your journey to an unknown place. That very exciting journey which is your life. Not that it is necessarily going to be as exciting as a life, but it will be exciting to you because it is your life. That is one of the great
secrets of existence, enjoying the gift of life that has been given to you.

(133)

Bunch Harmon in *A Murder is Announced* expresses similar views. “Because people like living, don’t they?....Even if you’re old and in pain and can just crawl out in the sun....It’s harder...for them to die, the struggle’s greater. I like living myself – not just being happy and enjoying myself and having a good time. I mean living - waking up and feeling, all over me, that I’m there - ticking over” (Christie 128).

Mrs Folliat in *Dead Man’s Folly* quotes Spenser “Sleep after toyle, port after stormie seas, ease after war, death after life, doth greatly please....” (Christie 48). These very lines have been engraved on Christie’s headstone when she died on January 12, 1976 and was buried four days later at St Mary’s Church, Cholsey. Thus we can conclude that her books are a mirror of her life and of her personality beyond a reasonable doubt.