

The Flavour of Murder: Food and Crime in the Novels of Agatha Christie

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Food and murder have had a paradoxical relationship ever since the first prehistoric hunter-gatherers put the first morsels of meat into their mouths. On one hand, eating means life: food is absolutely necessary to sustain life. On the other hand, eating means killing. Whether it is the obvious killing of an animal for meat, or the less obvious termination of a plant's life, one must destroy life in order to eat. It is assumed that this inherent tension between eating/living and eating/dying often informs and shapes crime narratives, not only in the recently invented genre of culinary mystery, produced most famously by Diane Mott Davidson and Joanne Fluke, but also, even if to a lesser extent, in classic detective novels of the 20th century. This article focuses on how the contradictory nature of eating is manifested in the work of Agatha Christie. By combining a traditional structuralist approach to crime fiction as a formula, as advocated by John G. Cawelti, with the methods of the emerging field of food studies, the paper aims to observe a classic, i.e., the classic detective story, from a new perspective.

Keywords

Classic crime fiction; Agatha Christie; food; murder; domesticity; feminization

I don't care in the least what you're reading
Please don't talk about murder while I'm eating
(Ben Harper, "Please Don't Talk About Murder While I'm Eating")

Everything here's a weapon:
i pick up a meat fork,
imagine
plunging it in,
(Pat Lowther, "Kitchen Murder")

Eating is a constant part of human life; a universal everyday phenomenon accompanying us since the beginning of humankind. In addition to its biological indispensability, eating has gradually acquired great symbolic significance and food as a symbol has naturally entered the realm of literature. Food as a basic element around which relationships and communities are constructed can serve numerous functions within a text, therefore an analysis concentrating on its various roles can open up interesting possibilities of reading literary works. This fact was acknowledged by a number of literary theoreticians and scholars, including Mikhail Bakhtin, Roland Barthes, and Julia Kristeva (Keeling and Pollard 8). The interest in food as a literary device has never been keener as in the last couple of decades, which have seen a massive rise in the popularity of various culinary and food-related texts, including not only cookbooks, but also a variety of other genres ranging from food memoirs (e.g., Laura Elise Taylor's *A Taste for Paprika*) to culinary detective novels (e.g., Virginia Rich *The Cooking School Murders*; Diane Mott Davidson *Fatally Flaky*; Joanne Fluke *Red Velvet Cupcake Murder*) (LeMay; Konieczna A3).

Food is not only present in texts which explicitly state their culinary nature, but also in a large number of other works of literature. Kevin Burton Smith points out that food accompanied crime in a wide array of classic crime stories, including those by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Edgar Allan Poe, and Rex Stout. This paper concentrates on the role food plays in crime stories by Agatha Christie, the queen of crime herself. It is assumed that similarly to contemporary culinary detective authors, Christie used food as an “index to character, an omen of events, a reminder that killers must eat, too, and their victims” (Walker 41), lending reality to the stories, vivacity to characters, and tempo to the plots.

However, as Alexander Walker observes, in addition to functioning as a literary device, food as a symbol can also gain a more sinister undertone in crime stories. Food, crime authors remind the reader, can be dangerous: it can conceal the criminal, distract the victim, or it can even be transformed into a murder weapon. As Diane Mott Davidson observes, “[f]ood and mystery stories are so popular because a preoccupation with food lends itself to the traditional domestic mystery that focuses on relationships”, [...] “In that genre, you see people pretending to like someone, but serving them food (that is) poisoned” (qtd. in McCracken E1). It is the aim of this paper to explore the paradoxical relationships between food and murder, safety and danger, nourishment and death and to determine how these oppositions fit into the

structuralist crime fiction formula as defined by John G. Cawelti. Moreover, the paper seeks to prove that Christie's use of food enabled her to bend the classic formula to a great extent and thus question and subvert the ideals of domesticity, femininity, and family well-established in the British society of her time.

The connection of food with killing and death tends to be tabooed and ignored in developed Western societies. The act of killing for food often provokes feelings of revulsion in contemporary Westerners (Wrye 54). Consequently, the cultural practice of cooking and the manifold rituals connected with the act of eating were developed over time in order to mask the closeness of humans to other animals, which is manifest in killing for food. In other words, eating rituals serve to mask "our own bestiality" (Symons qtd. in Wrye 54). Eating is traditionally understood as an act of care, nurturance, and communion, rather than an act of murder. Sarah Sceats maintains that "[f]ood is a currency of love and desire, a medium of expression and communication". She goes on to mention "the giving of symbolic bread and wine as a token of love and trust" and adds that "food may be an expression of support or an invitation to celebrate; for lovers there is an intimate, sexual subtext, appetite incorporated into sexuality" (11).

Indeed, food is often connected with safety, peace, and the absence of crime in Christie's novels. The opening scene, which Cawelti understands as the symbolic embodiment of peace and order soon to be disrupted by crime (97), is frequently set at the breakfast, lunch, or dinner table. The newspaper, coffee, and kippers – the indispensable breakfast props in a middle-class English family – in *A Murder Is Announced* (1950), the unappetizing, but homely boiled beef in *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), or the mid-morning tea served just like any other day at the typists' office in *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953) are all symbolic of the calmness of a household free from crime.

Even as the stories proceed and mysterious and disturbing events unfold, eating and food-preparation rituals serve to give characters at least momentary consolation and a feeling of normalcy. When Canon Pennyfather found out he had been kidnapped and drugged, and then got lost in the streets of London, he decided to stop and have dinner: after all, nine o'clock is dinner-time and it "seemed to him that though he was not quite as hungry as he ought to be, he had better keep his spirits up by having a meal" (*At Bertram's Hotel* 96). Later, after he fell unconscious, suffered a concussion, and was rescued, he mused: "Sausage and mash. The words had a faintly agreeable quality. 'I believe', he said to himself, 'I'm hungry'" (64). Not only food itself, but also kitchen

sounds, smells, and sights can have a calming effect on characters who are afraid or under stress (e.g., *Death Comes as the End* 23). Food, as well as drink, can even ease the pain after the death of a beloved person or a family member (*Death Comes as the End* 150, 184; *After the Funeral* 21, etc.).

While the dinner table frequently represents the initial stage of calmness which is about to be broken by crime, food can also become the means of restoring peace and calmness after the crime has been committed. When Poirot stops farmer Rowley from strangling his girlfriend Lynn at the last moment, he sends the excited man to make some coffee or tea and the routine actions connected with tea preparation help clear the shock and diminish the violence of the scene (*Taken at the Flood* 217). Anne, the protagonist of *The Man in the Brown Suit*, often uses food for comfort, be it ice-cream sodas to steady her nerves or “a substantial lunch” to fortify her “for further conflict” (355). She is similarly comforted by her fiancé Harry, who serves her a cup of milk and a bowl of soup after rescuing her from a murderer (265).

Such dissociation of food from crime is frequent in the novels. It is also consciously maintained by the characters, who refuse even to speak of murder and crime during mealtimes (*Nemesis* 117; *And Then There Were None* 107; etc.). On the day when one of the hotel guests has been murdered, the hotel manager decides it would be inappropriate to serve lunch to other tourists (*Evil Under the Sun* 207). In yet another story Poirot observes that the quarry garden where a murder had once been committed has a haunted feeling. No one wants to picnic there because as he remarks, sacrifice and victims do not go with hard-boiled eggs and lettuce and oranges and with “jollification” (*Hallowe'en Party* 203). What is more, while it is certainly inappropriate to stuff oneself while someone else has become a victim of crime, it is downright disgusting to a number of characters to share a meal with the criminal her/himself. John Cavendish, the son of the victim in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* claims emphatically that “one’s gorge does rise at sitting down to eat with a possible murderer” (67). Only after the main suspect Mr Inglethorp announces he is leaving the house can the Cavendish family finally enjoy a cheerful breakfast (138).

The conscious distancing of eating from murder reflects the denial of “the most basic feature of animal existence on planet Earth – that we are food and that through death we nourish others”, which, according to Val Plumwood, is embedded in the contemporary Western worldview. Predation, and especially “predation on humans”, the quintessential merging of eating and killing, is considered “monstrous” by many Westerners and the “[d]ominant concepts

of human identity position humans outside and above the food chain” (324). Moreover, many humans experience the feeling of revulsion not only when confronted with the idea of cannibalism or of humans being eaten by animals, but also with that of killing animals for food (Wrye 54). This revulsion is so strong that some people choose to stop eating meat, or they even become vegans and avoid “all products derived from animals, including wool and silk” (Angier) in order not to cause death.

However, with recent studies suggesting that plants, like animals, “are lively and seek to keep it that way” and that they can even learn, feel, and suffer (Angier), some claim that “[r]ather than just dismissing plant suffering as inevitable, vegans should try to reduce [plant suffering] as well”, in other words, they must admit their “own shame from harming plants” (Lewis). To sum up, it is an inevitable condition of humans as part of nature that they must end the lives of other creatures to sustain their own lives, and in turn, can become the means for the sustenance of the lives of others through predation, parasitism, or decaying. While this phenomenon is considered a “tragedy” (Angier) or understood as “suffering” (Lewis) by some, and on the contrary, believed to be the essence of life and an embodiment of the eternal cycle of being by others (e.g., Plumwood), it is nevertheless certain that death and food are inseparably connected.

Christie, although on one hand exploiting the traditional cultural symbolism of food as representing safety, peace, and the home also made use of this more problematic aspect of eating. Firstly, she depicted the dining ritual as something governed by strict laws that cannot be bent in the slightest, otherwise disaster ensues. The broken food ritual can be a bad omen. When a member of the dinner party is late or does not show up, it often signals that she/he is in grave danger (*By the Pricking of My Thumbs* 189) or has already been murdered (*Endless Night* 216). In *A Pocket Full of Rye* the careless handling of a teapot, together with the water that will not start boiling, foreshadow the poisoning of one of the characters by taxine administered in his coffee (5-7). Inaccuracy or carelessness in carrying out the tasks connected with food preparation can also become the cause of death. Such is the case with Mrs Inglethorp who was too distraught and nervous to sit down to a proper evening meal on the eve of her murder, and as a result the poisoner succeeded in killing her with only a small amount of strychnine, which would be much less harmful had she had a full stomach (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 43).

The gradual shift from understanding food as soothing and homely to connecting it with danger, hunt, and survival is clearly visible throughout

the plot of *And Then There Were None*. Upon the characters' arrival, when they take in the sight of drinks standing ready in the hall, they "cheer up" and lose their anxiety about accepting a suspicious invitation to become visitors in the house of an unknown man (40). However, as the story progresses and more and more members of the party are killed by a mysterious murderer, neither the assurance that the "larder is well-stocked" (156), nor the impeccable serving skills of the butler (53, 155) can succeed in restoring the sense of normalcy. In the end, when there are just three more people left alive on the deserted island, the mealtime is no longer a welcome ritual. The party stop gathering for meals around the dining table and instead eat them all together, standing around the kitchen table, fearing to let each other out of sight for a single moment (227-229, 266). All of them have become prey to an unknown hunter and spend every moment in fear for their lives, just like animals in the wilderness. In the end the fear grows so unbearable that all but one refuse to eat altogether, and the one character that still endeavours to take the trip to the kitchen to have his midday meal is killed in the process (268). Thus the story exemplifies how, in the words of Angelica Michelis, an "act of physical as well as symbolic abject violence signifies the collapse of boundaries between the (outside) world of crime and (inside) world of cultured consumption of food" (147).

In ways such as those delineated above, Christie pointed out that the belief that food is disconnected from death is false, or as Jane Jakeman puts it, she turned the "familiar and nourishing dishes – the secure and cosy snacks and remedies, redolent of nursery nostalgia" into bad omens, criminal tricks, or even weapons and "vehicles for poison" (1993). Christie often made her criminals hedonists who enjoy life and always welcome the opportunity to eat well (e.g., Mike in *Endless Night* or Sir Eustace in *The Man in the Brown Suit*), using the traditional notions of food and eating as safe, and of the personality of the well-fed jolly gourmand as inherently good to mask the criminal and misdirect the reader's suspicion. Thus a criminal's connection to food can enable her/him to commit the crime unsuspected. Such deflecting of suspicion is so successful that "it seems that the victim often gratefully received the fatal dose in some delicious little dish served up by an attentive murderer" (Jakeman).

The connection of cooking and ill will gains full force in the character of Miss Gilchrist, an unmarried middle-class woman reduced to the position of a servant by the decline of the economy in post-war Britain. Miss Gilchrist's dream of opening her own tea shop and "cooking nice little meals" for her customers (*After the Funeral* 173), along with her obsession with the "correct

composition of *brioche*s and chocolate *éclairs* [and] the proper use of herbs in cooking” (268) lead her to commit murder in order to gain financial means to fulfil her dream. At the same time Miss Gilchrist’s close connection to food renders her far removed from crime and violence in the eyes of the other characters in the story – nobody suspects the cake-baking and tea-serving old lady of planning a cold-blooded murder (164). She makes use of the food mask even when visiting the family of the deceased. She engages the old butler in talk of good old times and the meals that used to be shared, creating the feeling of safety and camaraderie and this way dispelling all suspicion (356). Thus, in the character of Miss Gilchrist, Christie was able to depict the paradox inherent in food, cooking, and eating: the inevitable contradiction between the sustaining and terminating of life that it embodies.

In his study of the history of poison, Morton Satin observes that food has always been a source of fear for the population, and that a certain amount of danger is embedded in the act of eating (14). Not only are people afraid of “foodborne diseases”, i.e., diseases caused by bacteria or other agents present in foodstuffs (22), but they also fear the deliberate contamination of their food, be it by the careless producer, the cheating tradesman (Beardsworth 151), or, more recently, the terrifying bio-terrorist (Satin 22). Moreover, as humans are omnivores, they are faced with what is called “the omnivore’s paradox”, which

emerges out of the fact that all omnivores (and this includes, of course, the human omnivore) experience the opposing pulls of *neophilia* (the inclination to sample novel food items) and *neophobia* (caution when confronted with novel items, based on the possibility that they may be harmful). All omnivores must find ways of coping with this paradoxical juxtaposition of attraction and repulsion. Thus, for the omnivore, eating is a profoundly ambivalent activity. (Beardsworth 152)

What is more, the omnivore’s paradox is not the only ambivalent aspect of food. In fact, three distinct paradoxes arise in the act of eating. Firstly, the human eater is faced with the “pleasure/displeasure paradox”, which stems from the fact that “while food can provide gustatory gratification and a welcome sense of fullness and satisfaction, it can also produce sensations and reactions ranging from mildly unpleasant to severely distressing” (152). Even more disturbing is the “health/illness paradox”, which is borne out of the fact that while food can contribute to one’s health and physical well-being,

the same food, when eaten immoderately, in a wrong manner, or when altered, can bring about disease or cause deterioration of the body (153). Finally, there is the ultimate “life/death paradox”, which was already discussed at the beginning of this paper; i.e., that “while the consumption of food is absolutely essential for the maintenance of life, the act of eating usually entails the death and dissolution of other organisms” (153).

This paradoxical nature of food and eating and the danger inherent in it have for long been recognized and utilized by crime fiction authors. As Glenn Collins observes, “[f]ood has always been one of the easiest ways to kill someone, as Agatha Christie and the Borgias can attest” (2012). In her article on food and crime, Angelica Michelis examines this interconnection more closely. She, too, acknowledges the ambivalence inherent in food, stating that

[r]epresentations of the preparation as well as the consumption of food are implicated in the construction of binary oppositions: civilisation vs. barbarism; inside vs. outside; pleasurable vs. abject, but at the same time reveal that these apparently separate spheres inhabit each other. Acts of consumption are moments of transgression as well as acts of sustenance. (144)

In Christie’s novels food is frequently viewed or directly used as a threat. In *A Pocket Full of Rye* a mad murderer uses the individual lines of a food-themed nursery rhyme as a theme for a series of murders (90, 120-121, etc.), while in *Death Comes as the End* the king’s new wife Nofret is greeted in the household with animosity and this animosity is expressed especially during shared meals: first her food is over or under-seasoned on purpose, later a dead mouse is baked in her bread (108). Another technique of threatening through food employed by criminals is the threat of starvation. When young adventuress Anne falls into captivity, the kidnappers plan on using hunger as an enforcement strategy: “A little starvation will do no harm [...] She will answer questions better if she is hungry” (*The Man in the Brown Suit* 199).

However, Christie’s criminals do not stop at using food to threaten their victims. On the contrary, they often resort to directly employing kitchen tools to accomplish the deed of murder itself. Michelis notes that the “kitchen knife, like a Brechtian prop, is often shown in its ambiguity as a tool in the preparation of food and as a weapon that can kill and violate bodies” (145) and indeed, Christie’s characters contemplate the usefulness of a sharp kitchen

knife as a weapon on a number of occasions (*The Murder at the Vicarage*; *A Caribbean Mystery*). Moreover, kitchen utensils or foodstuffs can be used to deflect suspicion, because objects as innocent as a picnic basket or a piece of vegetable seldom connote evil. This is cunningly made use of by a drug smuggling gang who hide heroin in salt and pepper containers (*Evil Under the Sun* 218), or by a South-African guerrilla who uses vegetable vocabulary to denote various items of munition (*The Man in the Brown Suit* 313). However, the use of food as a means of crime is at its most sinister in *Hallowe'en Party*, where a large bucket of apples in water is used by a maniac to silence a child who has witnessed his crime (31, 35).

An aspect of food consumption that connotes death and murder especially frequently is meat-eating. Unpleasant persons or criminals are characterized as “carnivorous” and this carnivorous nature renders them sinister and dangerous. For example, in *At Bertram’s Hotel* the hotel owner (and a member of the mafia) Mr Robinson is described in the following manner: “Mr Robinson smiled. He was a fat man and very well dressed. He had a yellow face, his eyes were dark and sad-looking and his mouth was large and generous. He frequently smiled to display over-large teeth. “The better to eat you with,” thought Chief Inspector Davy” (195). In *The Murder at the Vicarage* the sinister atmosphere of the vicarage household is enhanced by a story of a missionary who got eaten by a tribe of cannibals (27-31). Meat and death are explicitly put side by side in the first chapter of *Evil under the Sun*, when detective Hercule Poirot describes the leisurely sunbathers lying on the hotel beach, eliciting shocked disapproval from his female companion:

He waved a hand towards the recumbent figures. “That reminds me very much of the Morgue in Paris.”

‘Poirot!’ Mrs Gardener was scandalized.

‘Bodies—arranged on slabs—like butcher’s meat!’ (8)

Finally, probably the most frequent and also the most apparent merger of food and death is present in the motif of poisoning. Timothy Taylor observes that “[f]ood is married to crime through the poisoner”. Ever since the birth of the detective genre “plenty of fictional poisoning went on. Agatha Christie is littered with corpses whose last breaths smelled oddly sweet, or bitter, or of almonds”. And although accidental poisoning by spoiled fish or meat (*A Pocket Full of Rye* 27) or by unsanitary exotic foods (*A Caribbean Mystery* 8) is mentioned occasionally, most of the poisoning depicted on the pages

of Christie's novels is done deliberately with harmful intent. Through the motif of poisoning Christie was once again able to make use of the technique of distancing and turning the homely and familiar into the uncanny and dangerous. As stressed on numerous occasions in the novels (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* 160; *Three Act Tragedy* 75; *Evil under the Sun* 121; etc.) poison is considered a woman's weapon. As such it is doubly dangerous, because a woman is traditionally expected to be sensitive, calm, and caring, not aggressive and dangerous.

Paradoxically, it is exactly the caring and nurturing nature of food that is exploited by the poisoner and the crime of poisoning frequently displays a personal or even loving (twisted as such love may be) character. When Miss Waynflete tries to poison Bridget in *Murder Is Easy* she says she is going to get her a nice cup of tea, because that is what she needs to calm her after an upsetting event (285), and when Miss Marple is hospitably offered a cup of warm milk to help her sleep well, she is in fact being poisoned by her hostess (*Nemesis* 226). In *By the Pricking of My Thumbs* the characters mention a number of cases of caregivers who are revealed to be psychopathic murderers, poisoning their charges through lovingly prepared meals or cups of cocoa (211 or 339). Similarly, in *At Bertram's Hotel* a poisoner makes their act of murder caring and personal when they send a young girl Elvira a box of chocolates, in which poison was added only to the candies with violet cream, i.e., the ones the poisoner knew were Elvira's favourite (241). In *Nemesis*, again, Clotilde loves and cares for her charge so much that she prefers to poison her "painlessly" with an overdose of sleeping pills dissolved in a drink rather than let her marry a disreputable man (231). Thus in the figure of the female poisoner the two contradictory aspects of food – the nurturing and the lethal – are brought together and made one.

Food and drink are basic, ordinary, commonplace, and as such they might easily be taken for granted. This paper attempted to demonstrate the paradoxical nature of food and its symbolic potential within the framework of the classic detective novel. Food and detective fiction share a number of characteristics: they both rely to a great extent on ritualization, both are produced following a formula, and both are based on the inevitable interconnection of life and death. Moreover, food can become an especially useful tool in constructing classic detective stories, as are those by Agatha Christie, since they are frequently centred on a "cosy mystery", i.e., a murder in an ordinary, domestic environment of which food is an indispensable part. Such novels depict crime as embedded in the most intimate environment and

as springing from family ties and close relationships (Akersten 15). The present paper concentrated on how Christie used the genre of the classic crime story to uncover the contradictions inherent in an act as natural as eating, and to point to other elements of the “cosy” environment which might be more problematic than they appear, namely femininity, domesticity, and family. Her evil-minded nursemaids, dangerous spinsters, and murderous protectors all warn the reader that even the most intimate and comforting of relationships are fraught with danger and even the most precious of society’s ideals are never as unproblematic as they seem.

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