

# Innocence, Deception, and Incarnate Evil in Agatha Christie's *They Do It with Mirrors*

**Erika Ruonakoski**

## **Introduction**

In the posthumously published *An Autobiography* (1977), Agatha Christie (1890-1976) divides detective stories into three categories: the light-hearted thriller, the intricate detective story, and finally, “the detective story that has a kind of passion behind it—that passion being to help save innocence.”<sup>1</sup> While Christie’s ability to devise complicated and surprising plots is usually considered as her forte, it is her characterisation of the detective novels of the third kind that is particularly intriguing. Why should *saving innocence* be the passion that motivates her writing, and what kind of mental landscape do her stories reveal all in all? Considering she is the best-selling novelist of all times, we should, perhaps, be at least a little interested in the ideas of evil, deception and terror that her books, sunshiny and comic at the surface, convey.

The belief in the reality of evil and doubts about the usefulness of “idealist” carry-ons are articulated on a regular basis in Christie’s detective stories, quite often by the character of elderly but shrewd Miss Marple, a sharp observer of human behaviour. In this article I analyse one of the Miss Marple stories, *They Do It with Mirrors* (1952)<sup>2</sup> from the viewpoints of phenomenology and existential psychoanalysis. I start from the assumption

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<sup>1</sup> Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography* (London: Collins, 1977), p. 438.

<sup>2</sup> Agatha Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors* (London: Collins, 1955 [1952]). The book was and is not generally ranked among her best, but it is considered interesting for its discussion of social change. See, for example, Dennis Sanders and Len Lovallo, *The Agatha Christie Companion* (New York: Avenel Books, 1985), p. 274; Mary S. Wagoner, *Agatha Christie* (Boston: Twayne, 1986), pp. 80-81; Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green, OH: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982), p. 113.

that the act of reading is an intersubjective phenomenon, in which the voice of the other, in the form of written words, is enlivened by the reader, and that in this process a narrative selfhood is created—an experience of a self that is speaking to the reader within her, guiding her through different vistas while being made living by herself.<sup>3</sup> In Christie's detective stories, a host of suspicions and doubts are expressed from different viewpoints in the form of dialogue, which makes this selfhood a polyphonic and unstable one. At the end, however, conflicts are resolved and one truth is established.

In the following section, I briefly introduce the plot, setting and some of the characters, with an emphasis on the diverse deceptive role plays and an underlying sense of threat and decay. The subsequent section deals with the way in which the self-doubts and suspicions expressed in the dialogue are intertwined with the ideas of innocence and evil. In this context, I consult Christie's autobiography to trace what is called "the original choice" in Jean-Paul Sartre's existential psychoanalysis. After that I demonstrate the links between the earlier analysis and Miss Marple's role as the protector of the innocent. Lastly, I present my conclusions.

### Decay and Deception

"There is such a thing as evil—and I want you, Jane, to go down there right away and find out just exactly what's the matter."<sup>4</sup> These words, already evoking the theme of evil and Miss Marple's incomparable abilities as a sleuth, are uttered by Miss Marple's American friend Ruth Van Rydock in the opening scene of *They Do It with Mirrors*. Miss Marple is to check on Van Rydock's sister Carrie Louise Serrocold, who lives with her husband Lewis in an enormous mansion called Stonygates. Lewis Serrocold, a well-known benefactor of prisoners, runs a rehabilitation centre for juvenile delinquents in the extension of the mansion. During Miss Marple's visit to Stonygates Carrie Louise's stepson from an earlier marriage and trustee of

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<sup>3</sup> See Tua Korhonen and Erika Ruonakoski, *Human and Animal in Ancient Greece: Empathy and Encounter in Classical Literature* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), pp. 24-33; Simone de Beauvoir, 'My Experience as a Writer', trans. J. Debbie Mann, in *The Useless Mouths' and Other Literary Writings*, eds Margaret A. Simons and Marybeth Timmerman (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2011), pp. 282-301; Wolfgang Iser, *The Act of Reading: A Theory of Aesthetic Response* (Baltimore, MD: The John Hopkins University Press, 1980), pp. 96-97, and 109.

<sup>4</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 14.

the Gulbrandsen<sup>5</sup> Institute, Christian Gulbrandsen, is brutally murdered, while suspicions arise that somebody is trying to poison Carrie Louise. She remains alive, however, whereas her stepson from the second marriage, Alex Restarick, is later found dead, as is one of the inmates, Ernie Gregg.

The end result is fairly obvious from the start: Carrie Louise's self-absorbed and visionary husband Lewis has committed the murders to hide an embezzlement.<sup>6</sup> Less self-evidently, he has manoeuvred the murders with the help of one of the inmates, his assistant and illegitimate son, the young Edgar Lawson, using a number of "conjuring tricks" in the process. Even the threat of Carrie Louise's poisoning is invented by him to direct suspicions elsewhere.

Not differently from other detective stories, most things turn around at least once or twice in the course of the story: a "neglected" and "unloved" daughter is, after all, the one her mother most counts on, and a young "temptress" is a devoted wife. Towards the end of the novel, Christie piles up more and more references to the nature of illusions and reality, one of such reference points being the amateur theatre organised for the inmates. Miss Marple realises that she has been placed in "the audience" of the first murder, filling in the missing parts of the action, when the protagonists are backstage.<sup>7</sup> In Husserlian language, what is perceived appears always through its adumbrations, some of which remain hidden, and conjuring tricks play on the likelihood of spectator to "fill in" in one way rather than another. One of the characters is able to perceive the murder scene from the outside at the time of the murder, however, and therefore he is able to see other adumbrations than are the members of "the audience."<sup>8</sup> "When you only look at one side of a thing, you only see one side ... But everything fits in perfectly

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<sup>5</sup> According to Charles Osborne, Christie's description of the immensely rich Gulbrandsen family was inspired by a real-life counterpart, the family of the businessman and philanthropist Calouste Gulbenkian. Charles Osborne, *The Life and Crimes of Agatha Christie* (London: Collins, 1982), p. 162.

<sup>6</sup> Robert Merrill argues, in fact, that in many of Christie's best novels the killer turns out to be person who is "the most likely suspect." Robert Merrill, 'Christie's Narrative Games', in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, eds Jerome H. Delamater and Ruth Prigozy (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1997), p. 93. Cf. Ina Rae Hark, 'Impossible Murderers: Agatha Christie and the Community of Readers', in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction*, pp. 111-118.

<sup>7</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 157.

well if you can only make up your mind what is reality and what is illusion,” Miss Marple describes the situation.<sup>9</sup>

How do you know what is real? According to Carrie Louise, if you start doubting the things of which you were absolutely certain, you start doubting everything.<sup>10</sup> Christie’s novels teach us that we should rely on our intuition—that is, if we are level-headed people like Miss Marple. We only need to learn in which context to interpret our intuition. Miss Marple’s initial intuition concerns Edgar Lawson, who is said to suffer from paranoia and delusions of grandeur. In the beginning the only way she can express this intuition is by the words “he’s all wrong.”<sup>11</sup> Only little by little is she able to understand why he is “all wrong”: he is acting, and not only that, he is overacting; he is not mentally unstable but just helping Lewis to get away with murder by leading the investigators astray. Edgar’s words, however, uttered in the attempt to misdirect his audience, also reveal the ethical problem of conjuring tricks: “To have trusted someone! To have believed... and it was lies—all lies. Lies to keep me from finding out the truth. I can’t bear it. It’s too wicked.”<sup>12</sup>

Miss Marple herself participates in the game of disguises and illusion: she has infiltrated into the mansion under the disguise of a harmless elderly woman, who, penniless, comes to enjoy the hospitality of her rich friend. She dresses in her most worn-out clothes and listens carefully when people pour their hearts out to her. This disguise reflects in its own way the themes of make-believe and social rank central to the book. When Edgar comes to pick Miss Marple up from the railway station, he poses as “a busy and important man” who gives orders to others, or, with hindsight, he poses as a delinquent who fantasises himself as busy and important. Ruth Van Rydock, on the other hand, strives to appear youthful despite her age, so that with her careful make-up and stylish clothes, it is almost “impossible to imagine what she would look like in a natural state.”<sup>13</sup>

The clash between the haves and have-nots, or philanthropists and their objects, the social games involved in their interaction, and the deceptiveness of appearances are present also in the figure of Stonygates. The place is dedicated to good work, but it is, in fact, described by one of the

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<sup>9</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 171.

<sup>10</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 185.

<sup>11</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 106.

<sup>12</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 62.

<sup>13</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, pp. 7-8.

characters as “ghastly,” “a Gothic monstrosity,” and the new extensions are said to “have robbed the structure as a whole of any cohesion or purpose.”<sup>14</sup> Even though the inhabitants of the main house seem busy and relatively happy with themselves, their occupations appear futile and childish. With the exception of Edgar Lawson, we learn next to nothing about the delinquents and their life.

In the Marplean universe, wealth as such generates confusion, for while some dream of it, and some are willing to kill for it, others, who have it, do not quite seem to know what to do with it. The money has to be given away to “a worthy cause,” as Carrie Louise does, or it has to be spent on endless self-indulgence, as her sister Ruth does. Both Miss Marple and the young American guest Walter Hudd, who has a working-class background, observe that people with a lot of wealth cannot appreciate their luck. Miss Marple is annoyed by the poor state of the once magnificent garden, throwing herself in a half-hearted attempt to tidy up a flower bed, whereas Walter complains: “They’re rich, these people. They don’t need dough—they’ve got it. And look at the way they live. Cracked antique china and cheap plain stuff all mixed up. No proper upper-class servants—just some casual hired help. Tapestries and drapes and chair-covers all satin and brocade and stuff—and it’s falling to pieces! ... Mrs. Serrocold just doesn’t care.”<sup>15</sup>

In other words, the old way of life of the upper-class, which, at least in the nostalgic mindset of Christie’s characters, had its own integrity and beauty, is now falling apart, and a meaningless and shapeless form of life is taking its place, a mixture of misguided good will and ugliness like the mansion itself. The inmates, the social outcasts, whom the rich try to rehabilitate and who for the most part of the story stay out of sight, are still a menacing presence that may have an ability to rock the foundations of the life of the upper class. They are the unknown and horrifying other, who have to be controlled and on whose simmering dissatisfaction one has to keep a lid.

Yet the image of a house is not only a metaphor for a social class, but it can be interpreted, as it is often done, also as a metaphor for selfhood. In this way, the inchoate and degenerate state of the mansion could be seen to reflect a disturbed, unstable selfhood. Even the overall behaviour of the characters adds to this atmosphere of confusion and paranoia, loss of a stable self. It is typical of Christie’s stories that suspicion is thrown over all the

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<sup>14</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, pp. 24 and 26.

<sup>15</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 43.

characters one by one, except for the sleuth and narrator—who can also prove untrustworthy. This creates a narrative selfhood that speaks in different voices, mixing identities, and tries to keep up appearances, but cracks down in several places, revealing dark secrets here and there, the most terrifying one being that beneath the comic quotidian surface there is no coherent self or internal safety but merely darkness, or the ever-present possibility of death. In this sense, it is irrelevant who turns out to be the killer: the psychological suspense is based on the continuous uncertainty faced by the reader.<sup>16</sup> Whoever the killer is, catching them can only be a kind of disappointment, because this is where the original terror of a self for whom all others appear as potential harm-doers and death appears to lurk behind every corner, becomes localised and externalised and the possibility of death is denied. Nevertheless, this re-articulation of terror and despair as wickedness and externalisation in the figure of the killer is the *sine qua non* of Christie's detective stories.

### **Innocence in Light of Existential Psychoanalysis**

Within the broader topography of the polyphonic and unstable selfhood of *They Do It with Mirrors*, it is possible to detect a more explicit discussion of a struggle between good and evil, or, more precisely, of the attempt of a “protector” to save the innocent and to punish the evil. To understand Christie's predilection for these themes, it is useful to consult her autobiography, in which she discusses evil, innocence and wrongdoers at some length. She comes to the conclusion that evil is innate, a disability and abnormality, remnant from an age in which ruthlessness was a prerequisite for survival. The only purpose Christie can think of for such innately evil individuals in the contemporary society is to serve as human guinea-pigs for scientists.<sup>17</sup> These views are consistent with those expressed by many of her characters. In *They Do It with Mirrors*, both Miss Marple and Inspector Curry question the goal of the Gulbrandsen Institute to improve the lives of young criminals. They see the delinquents as lost causes and believe that the money would be better spent on well-bred women and men, who, keeping on the straight and narrow, would actually benefit the society.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> By this I do not mean to imply that Christie's techniques of diversion would not be central to her work. See, for example, Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive* (London: Collins, 1980), pp. 69-79.

<sup>17</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, p. 439.

<sup>18</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, pp. 103-104, and 106-107.

In her autobiography, Christie writes: “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.” It is her claim, then, that in her work, she is not even interested in the wicked, but in the innocent. She speaks of innocence with an almost religious fervour:

It frightens me that nobody seems to care about the innocent. When you read about a murder case, nobody seems to be horrified by the picture, say, of a fragile old woman in a small cigarette shop, turning away to get a packet of cigarettes for a young thug, and being attacked and battered to death. No one seems to care about her terror and her pain and the final merciful unconsciousness. Nobody seems to go through the agony of the *victim*—they are only full of pity for the young killer, because of his youth.<sup>19</sup>

As an author of detective stories, however, Christie gets to act as the protector of innocent victims: “The more passionately alive the victim, the more glorious indignation I have on his behalf, and am full of delighted triumph when I have delivered a near-victim out of the valley of the shadow of death.”<sup>20</sup>

To comprehend this zeal for saving near-victims more profoundly, let us briefly consider Sartre’s existential psychoanalysis, which, emphasising the fundamental freedom of human existence, traces a so-called *original choice* in a person’s—typically an author’s—life to understand their *fundamental project*, which constitutes the person in question. According to Sartre, the fundamental project is the unifying principle or “irreducible unification” of one’s life. In other words, each singular project of one’s life “expresses my original choice in particular circumstances.” The task of existential psychoanalysis is therefore to “discover and disengage” the unifying fundamental project. On the other hand, the fundamental project is always connected to our desire to *be*.<sup>21</sup> For instance, Jean Genet would have chosen to be the criminal and thief, as which he was seen by the others, to embrace evil.<sup>22</sup> This said, the original choice and fundamental project are, according to Sartre, “prelogical” and lived rather than known.

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<sup>19</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, pp. 438-439.

<sup>20</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, pp. 440.

<sup>21</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 582-85.

<sup>22</sup> Jean-Paul Sartre, *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, trans. Bernard Frechtman (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2012), p. 50.

Even if tracing an author's original choice and fundamental project on the basis of her life and writings is hardly unproblematic, in our case it may have some heuristic value. While Christie describes her early childhood as idyllic, for the most part, the themes of the deceptiveness of perception and the importance of a heroic attitude already come up in this context. She reports having had nightmares of a frightening gunman, or a friend or a family member turning into the gunman. When she at the age of four had a crush on her brother's friend, however, she did not fantasise herself as an object of adoration but as the protector who saves the adored young man from plague, fire or a fatal bullet.<sup>23</sup>

The most significant turning point in her childhood came when she was eleven: her father died. She describes the death of her father by saying that something "awful had happened," something she had "never envisaged *could* happen." This is when she becomes the "little comforter" of her heartbroken mother and starts to feel anxiety for her: "My mother had bad heart attacks since my father's death ... I used to wake up at night, my heart beating, sure that my mother was dead ... I would get up, creep along the corridor, kneel down by my mother's door with my head to the hinge, trying to hear her breathing."<sup>24</sup>

Interestingly, on the same page of her autobiography she calls herself of that time "an untried, naive girl."<sup>25</sup> To phrase the situation in Sartrean terminology, perhaps she could be said to have made the original choice to *be her own protector and saviour by protecting and saving others* (her mother). From this perspective, her detective stories might have provided a possibility to relive the trauma of her father's death and the fear for her mother's life, and to conquer those by saving the innocent—inspired not only by her affection for her mother, but the desperation of herself as *an innocent girl*.

Following this train of thought, the death of her mother in Christie's early adulthood could have been, first of all, an experience of failure to keep her mother alive, that is, a failure of her fundamental project. Secondly, being abandoned by her first husband Archie Christie while she was still sorting out the belongings of her mother in her childhood home must have felt like

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<sup>23</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, pp. 37-38.

<sup>24</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, pp. 111-112, and 118.

<sup>25</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, p. 118.

a deception par excellence.<sup>26</sup> One does not have to be a clairvoyant to connect the dots between the typical scenarios of Christie's detective stories and the broken marriage. In her autobiography Christie describes herself, in fact, as a young, trustful wife, and Archie as charming, but, when it came to his own interests, "ruthless."<sup>27</sup> Archie's declaration that he wants a divorce was followed by an extremely difficult period of time in Christie's life, which, incidentally, was also the time of her mysterious disappearance and alleged amnesia.<sup>28</sup>

The figure of an attractive but ruthless man is quite common in Christie's books. In *They Do It with Mirrors*, the husband is, while "not particularly impressive in appearance," nonetheless "with a personality that immediately marked him out," "a dynamo," "magnetic" to women like Carrie Louise, and even loving in his way.<sup>29</sup> Yet he is also a cold-blooded opportunist. In *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953), the killer is, again, of the same type: this time a handsome man with "a black heart,"<sup>30</sup> somebody who has his way with women, who is difficult to resist, even though you know how reckless he is. Miss Marple describes the murderer at the end of the story: "He's always been like that, you see. He has always been bad. Bad all through, although with it he's always been attractive. Especially attractive to women." One of his victims, on the other hand, is a "poor, silly, credulous girl," who used to be Miss Marple's maid and for whom she wants to get justice.<sup>31</sup> This juxtaposition resembles, of course, the one between Christie and her first husband.

This said, the recurring theme of a love affair between the "bad boy" and the "naïve girl" can also be interpreted to reflect the reader's desire to "know evil" by reading about it and by adopting the point of view of the murderer at some point in the course of the story.<sup>32</sup> From this perspective,

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<sup>26</sup> Carol Owens gives a similar interpretation of Christie's inner life in her fictional analysis of Christie. Carol Owens, *The Lost Days of Agatha Christie: A Psychological Mystery* (Stockbridge, Massachusetts: Cottage Press, 1996).

<sup>27</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, pp. 352-353.

<sup>28</sup> On Christie's disappearance see Jared Cade, *Agatha Christie and the Eleven Missing Days* (London: Peter Owen, 1998).

<sup>29</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, pp. 32-33.

<sup>30</sup> Agatha Christie, *A Pocket Full of Rye* (London: Collins, 1953), p. 188.

<sup>31</sup> Christie, *A Pocket Full of Rye*, pp. 179-180.

<sup>32</sup> Using as his example Christie's play *The Mousetrap* (1952), John Wren-Lewis suggests that detective stories should be read as variations of the Fall myth. John Wren-Lewis, 'Adam,

the attraction of detective stories cannot not be reduced to the narrative force of suspicion and fear but also our willingness to learn about the nature forbidden acts, such as murder, plays an important part.

Christie, however, insists on the importance of innocence in her writings, and while the admittedly speculative parallels between her personal life and her writings should be taken with a pinch of salt, they would make this predilection understandable. True enough, she also argues that she kept the straightforward, black-and-white way of relating to crime of the 1910s, which was when she first started writing detective stories. According to her, people “had not then begun to wallow in psychology,” nor were crime books “read for their love of violence, the taking of sadistic pleasure in brutality for its own sake” as they were later to be read.<sup>33</sup> Under the comical and reassuring surface level, however, her novels are penetrated not only by ominous prophecies of the approaching of evil forces, but also by a desperation of not-knowing, self-doubt and fear of losing one’s mind. The latter are even more explicitly present in the novels she wrote under the pen-name of Mary Westmacott. Consequently, Christie’s disapproval of psychologisation conflicts with the reoccurring themes of her work.

In consideration of her preoccupation with the victim’s situation, the question arises, however, where exactly in her detective novels the viewpoint of the victim or “innocence” is located, if it exists at all. More often than not a character can be an object of suspicion until the last pages of the book, and the identities of the intended victim and the killer are revealed only then. It is usual that the reader learns hardly anything about the victims before the murder, and the murder itself tends to happen behind closed curtains. Also, in *They Do It with Mirrors* we learn but little about the murder victims Christian Gulbrandsen, Alex Restarick, and Ernie Gregg.

Even if these men are “innocent” in the sense that they are brutally murdered rather than murderers themselves, they are not naïve or idealist. Alex Restarick is described as intelligent but immoral and somewhat repulsive, “an overfed faun.”<sup>34</sup> Instead, it is a woman’s, Carrie Louise’s innocence, or her naïve faith in the goodness of people, that is discussed throughout the novel. In the beginning of the story, Ruth van Rydock claims

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Eve and Agatha Christie: Detective Stories as Post-Darwinian Myths of Origin’, *Australian Religion Studies Review*, vol. 6, no. 1 (1993), pp. 20-24.

<sup>33</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, p. 437.

<sup>34</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 156.

that her sister “has always lived right out of this world.”<sup>35</sup> Miss Marple calls her “too unworldly,” and, according to Christian Gulbrandsen, she is “an idealist,” who “does not truly appreciate the evil that there is in the world.”<sup>36</sup> Lewis Serrocold’s testimony for her wife is almost identical: “My wife, Inspector Curry, is an idealist, a completely trustful person. Of her it may truly be said that she sees no evil, hears no evil, and speaks no evil.”<sup>37</sup>

It would then seem that there are several ways of being innocent. First of all, one can be *morally innocent*, that is, “not guilty,” because one does not engage in evil action, or, not in a specific evil action. A victim of assault, like the old woman in the cigarette shop, or Alex Restarick, whose head is crushed in at his theatre, does not “deserve” a violent death. Secondly, one can be *epistemically innocent* because one does not notice evil, that is, one is ignorant of some generally acknowledged aspects of life, or naïve. Thirdly, a person who does not “understand” evil intimately, that is, who has not yet lost her innocence by coming to know evil through traumatic events or the destructive acts of the other, could be called *fundamentally innocent*. Losing one’s fundamental innocence means facing one’s own vulnerability, the fact that one’s bodily existence as “the radiation of subjectivity”<sup>38</sup> can be put into question by a malevolent other or, more generally, by an uncontrollable destructive force. It is possible that many of us never lose this protective layer of fundamental innocence, which implies faith in the permanency of life as usual as well as in the overall benevolence of the other, and which enables us to live without doubting the justification and continuity of our lives.

Carrie Louise appears to be innocent in all these aspects: she is morally innocent, because she does not engage in evil action, she is epistemically innocent because she “sees no evil,” and, finally, she is fundamentally innocent, because she has not been hurt in the way that would make her lose her faith in other people. People close to her endeavour to save her epistemic and fundamental innocence, which are, undoubtedly, intertwined. Despite the centrality of the innocence embodied by Carrie Louise in the story, as a character she is almost unnoticeable, as if her self-effacing personality would define her place in the story. Humility is generally described as the greatest of virtues in Christie’s novels, but Carrie Louise appears to overdo humility

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<sup>35</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p.10.

<sup>36</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, pp. 46 and 59.

<sup>37</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 93.

<sup>38</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2010 [1949]), p. 283.

and selflessness, which is why these “virtues” of hers can be indicative of self-deception, cowardice or even an attempt to control others.<sup>39</sup> In the beginning it is hinted that she is in bad faith: her choice to ignore the less than virtuous motivations of other people might serve some hidden inner need of hers.

In the end of *They Do It with Mirrors*, when her husband has been revealed as a cold-blooded murderer and has drowned in the effort of saving his son’s life, Carrie Louise reacts with an astonishing calm, even stating that she is happy that things ended the way they did, “with his life given in the hope of saving the boy.” Despite their mutual love, Carrie Louise has always been aware that Lewis belongs to those very good people, who can be “very bad,” too; what he lacks is humility, without which the best of people can go astray. It is as if divine justice had taken place, and Carrie Louise does not object to it. She turns out to be less naïve than has been suggested, and less prone to be taken in by conjuring tricks than others.<sup>40</sup> Yet it is Miss Marple who has acted as her protector and has a hand in the administration of divine justice.

### “Evil Is Real”

At the beginning of *They Do It with Mirrors*, Christie gives us a short characterisation of Miss Marple’s pessimism, having Ruth Van Rydock state: “You’ve always been such a sweet innocent-looking creature, Jane, and all the time underneath nothing has ever surprised you, you always believe the worst.”<sup>41</sup> Miss Marple’s reply is typical: “The worst is so often true.”<sup>42</sup> This is only one of the numerous occasions in which her bleak view of humanity is revealed. Her pronouncements on the topic create something like a theme song that is repeated at least once during each story, starting from the very first novel in which she appears, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930).<sup>43</sup> In *A Murder Is Announced* (1950) Miss Marple says: “People, I find, are apt to be far too trustful. I’m afraid that I have a tendency always to

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<sup>39</sup> A similar selfless character (Ann Prentice), who lives in self-deception, is described in a novel written under the pen-name of Mary Westmacott and published the same year as *They Do It with Mirrors*. Mary Westmacott, *A Daughter’s a Daughter* (London: Heinemann, 1952).

<sup>40</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, pp. 181, and 184-86.

<sup>41</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, p. 14.

<sup>42</sup> Christie, *They Do It with Mirrors*, 14.

<sup>43</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (London: Collins, 1930).

believe the *worst*. Not a nice trait. But so often justified by subsequent events.”<sup>44</sup>

The catchphrase “the worst is so often true” introduces a twofold perspective on human existence: first of all, one’s fellow humans are not to be trusted without reserve, and secondly, evil is real. The distrust has as if a metaphysical foundation in our inability to truly know the other. In *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964), one of the characters remarks to her husband: “The truth is ... that one doesn’t really know anything about anybody ... Not even the people who are nearest to you.”<sup>45</sup> On the other hand, it is perhaps possible to read the phrase “the worst is so often true” also differently, as a statement about the ever-present possibility of death. In this case Miss Marple’s pessimism would not refer only to the wickedness and untrustworthiness of other people, but also to the fact of mortality and possibility of loss.

As it is well known, in her autobiography Christie writes that Miss Marple’s “powers of prophecy” and pessimism about human nature reflect those of Auntie-Granny—the aunt and adopted mother of Christie’s mother, and, incidentally, her father’s stepmother—whereas her fussy and “spinsterish” style comes from Auntie-Granny’s friends.<sup>46</sup> No more than Hercule Poirot is Miss Marple Christie’s alter ego, but she certainly voices many of Christie’s concerns and likes, and, as it was already pointed out, performs in the role of the protector in Christie’s fictional universe. More than that, she demands retribution against the wrongdoers, for as she puts it, “the wicked should not go unpunished.”<sup>47</sup>

In philosophy, evil is typically discussed from the viewpoint of the perpetrator, that is, we ask ourselves, what it is that makes our acts evil. The prioritisation of self-love over the moral law and the inability to think for oneself are some of the answers given to that question. Yet we can ask if it is actually possible to *be evil* or whether only our acts can be evil. Can evil be incarnated in an individual, as Christie seems to presuppose?

Sartre, for one, would challenge this idea. First of all, he argues that nobody can conceive themselves as truly evil. More precisely, even if one

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<sup>44</sup> Agatha Christie, *A Murder is Announced* (London: Collins, 2002 [1950]), p. 128.

<sup>45</sup> Agatha Christie, *A Caribbean Mystery* (London: Collins, 1964), p. 198.

<sup>46</sup> Christie, *An Autobiography*, pp. 435-36.

<sup>47</sup> Christie, *A Pocket Full of Rye*, pp. 88-89. Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker suggest that Miss Marple stories, more than Poirot stories, can be seen as morality tales. Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker, *Reflecting on Miss Marple* (London: Routledge, 1991), p. 3.

might regret some of one's actions, it is impossible to believe in good faith that one is evil. This is because of our ontological inability to *be* anything in the manner of in-itself: as conscious beings we are always in the state of becoming rather than being.<sup>48</sup> Even if we believed that we are evil due to the judging or indifferent gaze of a parent that gave us as "inadequate" or "bad" to ourselves already in childhood, this would be a case of misconception and to be entertained only in bad faith.

From this perspective, Christie's division of people to the good and the wicked seems unjustified. It is possible, however, to entertain the idea that her charming but ruthless villains are, in fact, psychopaths. A psychopath himself might not think of himself as evil, but his inability to seriously consider the good of others would still make him look like a constant source of evil acts and, as such, evil from the perspective of others.

In principle, the typification of the other as "fundamentally evil" or "deranged" does not presuppose the innateness of evil, nor does it presuppose the "objectivity" of evil. The person can still have a personal history that explains their behaviour, and a future that, regardless of my anticipations, may very well involve a dramatic change for the better, at least for them. In Christie's fiction, however, this is not the case. Evil is embodied by the murderer: the murderer *is* evil through and through. No general decency can be expected from "the wicked": they will not change, for there is a specific destructivity embedded in their patterns of behaviour that cannot be undone. Such evil-doers will "strike again" and therefore have to be eradicated.

Capital punishment was abolished in the United Kingdom only in 1969, so, in fact, the idea that evil must be eradicated by the most extreme means had a legitimised status during the time Christie wrote most of her detective stories. From early on she introduced also characters with "modern ideas," including the idea that it is possible to "cure" convicts of their dispositions. Such "nonsense," however, is rejected either by appealing to common sense (*The Murder at the Vicarage* [1930]) or to the more "scientific" view that the cause for a criminal character lies in the genes (*Nemesis* [1971]).<sup>49</sup>

The need to isolate or destroy the wicked comes up also in *Nemesis*, in which Miss Marple wonders if she herself is, in fact, ruthless, when it

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<sup>48</sup> Sartre, *Being and Nothingness*, pp. 297-299.

<sup>49</sup> Agatha Christie, *Nemesis*, (London: Collins, 2002 [1971]).

comes to punishing the evil-doer and promoting justice. A similar idea is present in many other stories by Christie: an evil deed must be avenged. In *They Do It with Mirrors*, it is the fate of the murderer and his accomplice to drown, and in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* and ‘The Incident of the Dog’s Ball’ (2009), for instance, the murderers take their own lives on Poirot’s suggestion. Finally, in *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* (1975), Poirot himself commits murder in order to stop the killings instigated by a malicious individual.<sup>50</sup>

As vehicles of revenge of the injured party or divine justice Marple and Poirot represent righteousness that goes beyond the conventions of the society and even the teachings of forgiveness in the New Testament. Indeed, even if the insistence by both Christie and her characters on the objective existence and genetic character of evil and their justification of revenge appear as simplistic, to say the least, there is a certain truth to them when considered from the viewpoint of phenomenology of violence and trauma. It is the perspective of the victim on the question of evil that her works throw into relief.

From this perspective, the motives of the destructive act—which we experience as evil, because it hurts us—are less important than one might think. More significantly, the violent other destroys our innocence, that is, our unhindered intentionality: “an innocent child” is one whose orientation towards the world and others is not mediated through the internalisation of the malevolent other. The child is “naïve,” because she experiences herself as the omnipotent and indestructible centre of the universe, loved and protected by others, whereas with time, and in different degrees depending on our individual circumstances, we come to realise that there are others who ignore or harm us, or that there are invisible but yet destructive forces that can frustrate our attempts. Our orientation towards the world may then become channelled through the acknowledgement of the existence of the malevolent force, and we choose to fight it, evade it, or submit to it. Usually it is only much later in life that we learn to disengage ourselves from such orientations.

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<sup>50</sup> Agatha Christie, ‘The Incident of the Dog’s Ball’, in John Curran, *Agatha Christie’s Secret Notebooks: Fifty Years of Mysteries in the Making* (London: HarperCollins, 2009); Agatha Christie: *Curtain: Poirot’s Last Case* (London: Collins, 1975). Christie did not publish ‘The Incident of the Dog’s Ball’ in her lifetime, but developed it into a novel, *Dumb Witness* (1937). The short story was found and published posthumously.

As we have seen, the motivating choice of Christie's novels is the choice to fight evil and to "save innocence." Therefore, the apparent chaos of doubts, fears, impasses and despair resolves into neat and strictly separate categories of the wicked, the innocent and the protectors in the denouement. "Evil is real," claim Christie's characters, and true enough, it is real for the traumatised, whatever the cause of their trauma. Christie shows us the convulsive way in which the victim relates to that evil, unable to tear herself free from the hurt. One way to deal with the post-traumatic situation is to fantasise retribution as distributed by divine justice—and who better to serve in that task than a grandmother-like figure who is not a threat to other women but their sympathiser and secret protector?<sup>51</sup>

### Conclusion

*They Do It with Mirrors* opens up a specific viewpoint to the topic of evil: that of the victim, or a hurt individual who is trying to deal with the injustice she has encountered. From this perspective, also the idea of evil as real, incarnated in wicked individuals, ceases to be merely an outdated black-and-white outlook on life and becomes understandable as a lived experience. I have suggested that, from the viewpoint of existential psychoanalysis, Miss Marple can be interpreted as Christie's narrative vehicle for performing her fundamental project to protect and save herself—the terrified, *innocent* child within herself—by protecting and saving others, in the universe of fiction. In this universe, Miss Marple voices the commonsensical indignation towards the acts of the wicked, protects the innocent and helps eradicate the incarnate evil. In the denouement, she stabilises the until then unstable narrative selfhood by giving an account of the events that supersedes all competing accounts, and puts an end to all suspicions.

As we can now see, the idea of incarnate evil is inherently connected to the phenomenon of losing innocence. The latter implies being put into question on an existential level by a malevolent other or a traumatic event, and, subsequently, the restructuring of one's orientation to the world through these. It is the horror of this possible loss together with the dynamics of the unstable narrative selfhood that we are hooked by when we read Christie's detective stories. "Who did it" is much less relevant.

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<sup>51</sup> For revenge fantasies of the traumatized see, for example, Limor Goldner, Rachel Lev-Wiesel and Guy Simon, 'Revenge Fantasies After Experiencing Traumatic Events: Sex Differences', *Frontiers in Psychology*, vol. 10 (2019), at [frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00886](https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.00886), accessed 10/06/2020.