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Neurodiversity and Autism in Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot

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ABSTRACT

Neurodivergence and Autism have been historically stigmatised as incapacitating conditions that rendered every individual affected as antisocial and non-verbal with high support needs. Aside from the excruciating bias and discrimination that people diagnosed with Autism experience through their lives there seems to be another important problem, underdiagnosis. Taking into consideration that both Neurodiversity and Autism contain in their very definition the concept of the spectrum it is necessary to analyse and interpret other possibilities within these conditions. In an attempt to do so, in this dissertation, I intent to analyse the fictional detective, Hercule Poirot, created by Agatha Christie, under the conviction that he exists somewhere in the continuum of Autism and Neurodiversity. To do this, I will use the innovative and critically acclaimed book by Dr Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing our Hidden Neurodiversity*. This analysis will contain more theoretical approaches that will be based on the area of psychology and psychological interpretation, and literary analysis using Christie's novels in an attempt to associate the actual psychology of Poirot and his representation through literary devices in paper.

Keywords: Neurodiversity, Autism, Hercule Poirot, Agatha Christie, Dr Devon Price, masking, marginalisation, narratology, discriminated groups.

RESUMEN

La Neurodivergencia y el Autismo han sido históricamente estigmatizadas como unas condiciones incapacitantes y que convierten a aquellos individuos afectados en seres antisociales y no verbales con gran necesidad de apoyo. Más allá del sesgo y la discriminación atroces que los identificados como Autismo experimentan a lo largo de sus vidas, parece haber otro problema importante, el infradiagnóstico. Tomando en consideración que tanto la Neurodiversidad como el Autismo contienen en sus definiciones el concepto del espectro, es necesario analizar e interpretar otras posibilidades con respecto a estas condiciones. Por ello, tengo la intención de analizar, en esta tesis, al detective ficticio, Hércules Poirot, creado por Agatha Christie, bajo la convicción de que se encuentra en algún lugar del espectro del Autismo y la Neurodiversidad. Para hacer esto, utilizaré el innovativo libro del Doctor Devon Price, *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing our Hidden Neurodiversity*, aclamado por la crítica. Este análisis contendrá acercamientos más teóricos basados en el área de la psicología y la interpretación psicológica, y el análisis literario utilizando las novelas de Christie en un intento de asociar la psicología de Poirot y la manera en la que está representado, en término de recursos literarios, en papel.

Palabras clave: Neurodiversidad, Autismo, Hércules Poirot, Agatha Christie, Doctor Devon Price, enmascaramiento, marginalización, narratología, grupos discriminados.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Neurodiversity is a considerably recent field of investigation in the departments of psychology, psychiatry and neuroscience. But it is much more than that. Nicole Baumer and Julia Frueh, in an article called “What is neurodiversity?” for Harvard Health Publishing, describe it as “the *idea* that people experience and interact with the world around them in many different ways” (Baumer & Frueh). This conception brings us back to the etymology of the word. “Neurodiversity” comes from the prefix “neuro-” (that refers to something related to the nervous system, which ultimately provides us with the ability to experience and react); and the word “diversity” defined in the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “the condition of having or being composed of different elements” (“Diversity”, def. 2). Therefore, we may interpret neurodiversity as a way of living which considers people having other ways of interacting with the world other than the canonical, or in other words, neurotypical.

The concept of neurodiversity is well known and mostly used when discussing topics like Autism or ADHD. However, it also includes other neurodevelopmental disorders such as dyslexia or communication, intelligence and learning disorders. What is more, it is also related to other atypical mental and behavioural traits such as depression, anxiety, eating disorders, Tourette syndrome, antisocial personality disorder, etc. Undiagnosed people, or patients who cannot be catalogued in one group or another, are also neurodivergent and at the same time, the conditions listed above can be understood as guidelines to relatively general neurotypes. In addition to this, it is necessary to acknowledge that conditions as different as anxiety and depression are, on a number of occasions, diagnosed together; a fact that settles the human mind as fluid and diverse on its own. Finally, another essential detail to comprehend the broad

concept of 'neurodiversity', is the existence of a continuum in the very characteristic. The most popular example of this is Autism, technically called Autistic Spectrum Disorder (ASD). The word "Spectrum" conveys this idea of a continuum and tries to shatter any perspective of the condition as prototypical. Among Autistics, there are infinite subtypes, but they are mainly tagged as "high functioning" or "low functioning" usually based on the amount and/or specificity of the support they need to deal with the canonical world.

2. CONTEXT

2.1 A brief introduction to Agatha Christie

In order to understand Poirot better it is necessary to know a few details about Agatha Christie's life and inspiration, and for that, the information of this section comes from the web page The Home of Agatha Christie, and her autobiography *Agatha Christie: An Autobiography* (1977).

Agatha Christie was born in Torquay in the county of Devonshire, on 15 September 1890, the youngest of three children. She took in an avid interest in reading from a young age, and was likely influenced by her mother's creativity as a storyteller. Her father died when she was very young, and out of economic necessity, her mother and her moved to southern France for a while. From here onwards, they moved consistently to London, Torquay, Paris, Cairo, and finally back to London. In 1912, Agatha met Archie Christie in England. At that time, she was promised to her friend Reginald Lucy, but she broke off their two-year engagement and married Christie in 1914. During World War I she worked as a nurse while her husband was fighting in

France. They barely saw each other, but it was the year of his return, in 1918, that they began their married life; and a year later, they welcomed their first daughter, Rosalind, to the world. Finally, after sending her first manuscript to a number of publishing houses, her first novel was published in 1920.

The rest of Christie's life was a contrast of happiness and sadness. She became one of the best-selling authors ever, as well as the main representative of the detective novel. However, a very mysterious event took place. One day Agatha Christie, fed up with stress, abandoned her car and disappeared. This episode was one of extreme public controversy, until it eventually became known that she had been found in a hotel in Harrogate under a fictitious name. There was a lot of speculation surrounding this drama. Some of the theories suggest she might have discovered that her husband was planning on leaving her for another woman and she wanted to punish him by setting him up. However, the truth is she did not even recognise her husband, and ended up spending some time in a psychiatric ward in London. Eventually, the Christies got divorced and she flew away with her daughter to the Canary Islands in 1928. At the end, she got married again to archaeologist Max Mallowan in 1930, and they stayed together until her death on 12 January 1976.

The inspiration for the character of Hercule Poirot came from a Belgian refugee. During World War I, many people were displaced and forced to take refuge away from their home countries. In the case of Torquay, they took in a group of Belgian refugees, and one of them, a former great Belgian policeman, was the inspiration for Poirot. What is more, in Agatha Christie's first ever novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), the public was introduced to Hercule Poirot in the shape of a detective that is part of a group of Belgian refugees.

2.2 Dr Devon Price's *Unmasking Autism: The Power of our Hidden Neurodiversity*

The theoretical framework of this dissertation is going to be extensively based on Dr Devon Price's publication, *Unmasking Autism: The Power of Embracing Our Hidden Neurodiversity*. Dr Price is an American psychologist who has dedicated a significant portion of his studies to analysing Autism and Neurodiversity. At the very beginning of this book in Chapter 1, he reveals he is himself Autistic, and gives the reader some biographical information about his life. He explains that he had already been showing traits that could be associated with Autism for years, but that due to his social and personal upbringing those traits had been suppressed. While growing up, he had tried to hide those traits, and when they became noticeable, he simply ruled them out as part of his personality. Eventually, by the summer of 2009, Price had started to suffer from emotional burnout, which intensified by that winter and continued accompanying him until 2014, when a cousin of his came out to him as Autistic. It was as a result of this event that he started to investigate more about Autism. He says: "Though I was a psychologist, all I knew about Autism was the broadest and most dehumanising of stereotypes" (4).

In the process of investigating, he realised how he identified with the general characteristics of this neurotype, and he was able to trace it back to many of his childhood behaviours.

As I grew up, I learned to be less intense, less embarrassing – less me. I studied other people's mannerisms. I spent a lot of time dissecting conversations in my head, and I read up on psychology so I could understand people better. That was why I'd gotten a PhD in social psychology. I had needed to carefully study the

social norms and patterns of thinking that seemingly felt natural to everybody else. (Price 5)

Luckily, after getting diagnosed, he was able to stop inhibiting his feelings and impulses. He began to surround himself with other Autistics and discovered that the repressing work that exhausted him for years was what caused him to feel, as he puts it, “broken” (3). He learned to let loose any feelings he had that would have been deemed “abnormal” by the canonical society and embrace his Autistic traits as something different from the norm but not dehumanising. In addition to this, he also discovered that other Autistic people also have experience with the suppression of their actual selves. This led him to the concept of ‘masking’, something he mentions extensively in his book. He argues that ‘masking’ is “a camouflaged version of the disorder that’s still widely neglected by researchers, mental health providers, and Autistic people...” (6). The camouflaging is carried out by their own selves in an attempt to hide the traits that would have them tagged as ‘weird’ by the rest of society. The fact that some Autistics are capable of recognising and analysing the normalised actions and reactions could be used as an argument against the neutralisation and generalisation of the canonical concept of Autism as the disorder of people who are ignorant of social cues and norms. On the contrary, Autistic people may be some of the best at ‘reading the room’. Dr Price, in Chapter 3 of his book, elaborated a table meant to reframe Autistic stereotypes, and in this table, he establishes that what people catalogue as “cold and unfeeling” in Autistics is, in reality, their “analytical, rational and thoughtful” personalities (147).

Nevertheless, this does not explain why it took so long for anyone to recognise it or to encourage him to seek evaluation. Dr Pierce realised this and started reflecting on the social representations of Autistic people. He suggests mass media representations of Autistic people are limited and restricted to the focus of the heteropatriarchal society.

Usually it's white boys with conventionally "masculine" interests and hobbies that are flagged as potentially Autistic when they are young. Even within that relatively privileged class, it's almost exclusively wealthy and upper-middle class Autistic kids who get identified. (Price 6)

Based on this he calls the reader's attention to a relatively new and moderately accepted subtype of Autism that the experts call 'female Autism'. The term relates to the invisibility of women in the heteropatriarchal view of Autism. This subtype of Autism is supposed to be milder and less noticeable and is sometimes used to describe masking Autistics. However, Pierce rejects this notion on the basis that "To call the stealthy, more socially camouflaged form of Autism a "female" version of the condition is to indicate that masking is a phenomenon of gender, or even of assigned sex at birth, rather than a much broader phenomenon of social exclusion" (8). What we can extract from this is that the general conception of Autism is far from inclusive, as there are many more varieties of the condition that express their neurodivergence in a different, albeit also similar, way.

2.3 Neurodiversity in crime fiction

It could be said that neurodivergent traits and characters are relatively common in the literary genre of crime fiction. As Brandy Schillace, an Autistic mystery writer and historian suggests in an article for CrimeReads, "The Power of Neurodiverse Characters in Mysteries", that "... as it happens, cozy-style mysteries of all sorts have been a safe haven for neurodiverse characters (and readers) ..." (Schillace).

Through history, in many areas such as literature, neurodiversity and all the conditions it comprises, has been either absolutely excluded or included in terms of

marginalisation, silencing and punishment. Similarly, other characters such as LGBTQ+ people, racialized people, and even women have suffered from this exact discrimination. However, crime fiction is in itself a literary genre that is tasked with supplying even the most marginal of characters with a role—as could be the case with the murderers. What is more, crime fiction relies heavily on atypical characters for two main reasons, to convey monstrosity and to create mystery.

In crime fiction as in other genres like the gothic novel and horror fiction, monstrosity is used both as an atmospheric, aesthetic trait and as a source of attraction for readers. Literal examples of this are the vampires in *Carmilla* (Sheridan Le Fanu, 1871-72) or the monster of *Frankenstein* (Mary Shelley, 1818); but also the racial Tonga in *The Sign of the Four* (Arthur Conan Doyle, 1890), the queer Dr Frank-N-Furter in *The Rocky Horror Show* (Richard O'Brien, early 1970s) and the 'femme fatale', Merricat in *We Have Always Lived in the Castle* (Shirley Jackson, 1962). Overall, monstrous characters are sometimes used in detective stories to portray the criminal, usually the assassin. In the same way, atypical characters may be included in crime fiction for their monstrosity or their rareness as a source of mystery. This is the case in Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot, a character that is at times so bizarre an alien that it attracts the attention of the reader. In the article aforementioned in this section, Schillage mentions some prominent detectives in crime fiction that seem to possess certain traits that would put them under the definition of neurodivergence. She talks about Sherlock Holmes, who she describes as "Whip-smart, but seemingly bad at close relationships" and mentions others like "... the fastidious habitual perfectionist Hercule Poirot [...]" and "[...] Rex Stout's Nero Wolfe with his special interests, avoidance of social situations, and low emotional affect". (Schillage)

3. HERCULE POIROT, AN AUTISTIC DETECTIVE

It is commonly believed that having such a proficiency in an area such as psychology, Poirot cannot be an Autistic detective. This is usually due to the fact that neurotypical people that are unfamiliar with such a condition, tend to imagine an Autistic person as completely dependent, antisocial and even non-verbal; however, this is not necessarily the case. Without getting into much detail, there are various Autistic psychologists, such as Dr Devon Price, the author from which the theory for this dissertation has been extracted and who did not even know he was Autistic until after he finished his degree into psychology. A reason for the existence of Autistic psychologists—even when people wrongly believe Autism is always a synonym of non-verbal and antisocial—may be related to the still mysterious field of undiagnosed Autistics.

Seeing as Autism, like Neurodivergence itself, is a very complex characteristic and that certain traits that may seem absolutely Autistic might not be possessed by some Autistics in the slightest; Dr Price elaborated in his book a small list with some of the most general traits in identification. Overall, it could be said Poirot fits most—if not all—of them. He is, for instance, hyperactive to even small stimuli and has sometimes trouble distinguishing between information or sensory data that should be ignored or carefully considered. In this case, both qualities are essential to his role as a detective, for it helps him to notice things that would rarely be noticed or even considered by neurotypical people. Moreover, he is also the type to focus on details rather than the whole picture and is deeply analytical. He is significantly methodical, too; but he also relies slightly on so-called “gut feelings”. Hercule Poirot is an avid follower of ‘the method’, both to solve crimes and in his real life. Together with his ostensible obsession

with order they make one of the greatest fictional detectives; but also, traits that are in the crossroads of two Neurodivergent conditions, Autism and OCD (Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder). Additionally, Poirot also relies heavily on ‘stimming’, which Price describes as “an important means of self-regulation” (26). He is rather keen on touching his moustache, especially when he is thinking intensely or when he is socially interacting with someone—usually when in the company of a familiar person, like Captain Hastings or Inspector Japp, but not when interrogating witnesses or suspects. Dr Price comments on the possible reasoning behind stimming in his book: “It helps sooth us when we’re anxious or overloaded with stress, and it helps express joy and enthusiasm” (26). Therefore, it could be argued that Poirot stims in order to relieve his body and mind from the tensions that arise from dealing with intense or extended social interactions.

3.1 Marginalisation in narratology and national identity

The narratology of Agatha Christie’s works also serves a great purpose when it comes to the shaping of the detective’s character. The narrator plays the role of providing the reader with the content of the story, and sometimes the point-of-view as well. Having established this, the narration is rarely entrusted to the detective in Christie’s novels; something that can be attributed to the foreign design of Christie’s principal characters. To show that, I am going to focus on the detective figures of Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple in Christie’s fictional world. Both Poirot and Marple are marginal characters in Christie’s universe for different reasons and because of this they are usually excluded from the role of the narration or focalization. In Miss Marple’s case, she’s an elder, spinster woman from the small fictional village of St. Mary Mead. Also, she’s not a

detective in profession or qualification but she plays this role in many of Christie's novels. Her condition as old, female and unmarried makes her in the eyes of that time—the mid twentieth century—completely irrelevant, and as such, she's hardly ever seen as the narrator or focaliser. More often than not she plays the part of the old, gossipy woman who observes and knows too much.

Similarly, Poirot is also marginalised in the narration, and it may be argued that there are two reasons for this. Firstly, he's Belgian. Therefore, his condition as a literal foreigner makes him a figurative one, too. It seems likely Christie's choice on Poirot as her first and main detective might have been related to this. Being a Belgian, Poirot's nationality can be seen as something directly associated with his plausible neurodivergence; he would have been an outsider to, for example, the British society, but also an outsider to the neurotypical community. It could be assumed Christie used 'the foreign trait' and its strangeness to distract the reader from another barrier between his personality and that of the rest. Moreover, there is also a language barrier between Poirot and the rest of the characters of Christie's novels, who are usually British or English speakers. Even though he has a good grasp of the English language, he tends to utter sentences and expressions in French here and there. This detail is very significant, for it could be related to his supposed condition of Autistic. It is commonly known that many of them are non-verbal or have some degree of difficulty with language, and this could be symbolised in the French sentences he speaks once in a while, which would probably be hard for many to understand.

Commonly substituting Poirot in the role of the narrator and the focaliser is usually Captain Hastings. Arthur Hastings is a World War I soldier on leave and an old friend of Poirot. Also, he is his companion in many of them in a similar fashion to Dr Watson in the Sherlock Holmes series. In fact, in parallel with Dr Watson, Captain

Hastings is also in charge of the narration of a number of Hercule Poirot cases. An instance of this would be *The ABC Murders* (1936) where a ‘foreword’ can be found before the beginning of the story. Here, Hastings declares that he is set to become the narrator of this novel, both in the events in which he is the focaliser and those in which he was not present. In addition, in this extract the reader is given an insight into Hastings’ personality and the way it complements Poirot:

If I have taken a certain poetic licence in describing the thoughts and feelings of various persons, it is because I believe I have set them down with a reasonable amount of accuracy. I may add that they have been ‘vetted’ by my friend Hercule Poirot himself. (Christie, “Foreword by Captain Arthur Hastings, O. B. E.”)

In the previous extract it can be noticed that Captain Hastings has a somewhat more unreliable and poetic narrative style, something that Poirot himself calls him out for. This fact introduces the next argument for the characterisation of Hercule Poirot as a neurodivergent character, their complementary attitudes and the parallelism between theirs and Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson’s. Captain Hastings represents a very different fictional figure in comparison to Poirot which sets them apart as the conventional character and the atypical one—or in other words, neurotypical and neurodivergent. Hastings is a young man in his thirties who participated in the last war (WWI) and possesses passionate, romantic personality traits. The subjectivity in his behaviour would make a considerable rift with Poirot objectivity and methodism if it was not for the way their differences help them compliment themselves. Another trait of Poirot’s to be considered is his tendency to stay in the dark. He tends to isolate from the rest, unless necessary; which seems obvious when analysing his renunciation of the role of narrator and focaliser. Sometimes he would depart from his companions or colleagues

to collect clues or simply to think. For instance, during his first apparition, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), due to the complicated development of the case, Poirot decides to be secretive with his friend Hastings, which in turn, angers Hastings increasingly through the novel. This straining episode can be interpreted as the consequences of the clash between Poirot's need to keep to himself and Hastings's exalted sociability and transparency. As a consequence, it could be said that Hercule Poirot's secrecy and need to isolate once in a while, is another marker of the alien figure he is supposed to represent. In *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928), one of the characters is in charge of presenting him to the audience, and the choice of words conveys perfectly the mystery that Poirot represents to the neurotypicals:

‘He is a very remarkable person,’ said Knighton slowly, ‘and has done some very remarkable things. He has a kind of genius for going to the root of the matter, and right up to the end no one has any idea of what he is really thinking.’
(137)

3.2 Comparison with Sherlock Holmes

Comparatively, Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes and Dr Watson can be said to be parallel, in their roles and character, to the figures of Hercule Poirot and Captain Hastings, respectively. Firstly, the unfamiliar figures of Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot, who share similarities mostly in their alien-like personalities and their expertise in mystery-solving. However, the detail that possibly makes them most alike is the fact that both of them may be neurodiverse characters. It has been generally accepted by the public and the experts that Sherlock Holmes is rather overtly neurodivergent—some would go as far as to specifically describe him as Autistic and/or Asperger—, and as

parallel figures, Hercule Poirot could be, too. In an article called “Sherlock Holmes vs Hercule Poirot: Who Is The Better Detective?”, popular culture writer and literature graduate Guniya Sharma makes a comparison between both characters with the intention of naming the better detective. In the process she elaborates a list of qualities they share in common, among which, some are familiar neurodiverse features. The second one, for instance, suggests that “The character is usually emotionally and socially awkward with little to no family and friends” (Sharma). Social awkwardness is something that accompanies Holmes and Poirot, though for different reasons. Sherlock has a much more cryptic personality and much less interest in dealing with other people while Poirot is socially awkward but in a much subtler way. Because of his specific focus on psychology for the solving of mysteries, Poirot is considerably more amiable and open to socialising than Sherlock Holmes is, though he still maintains certain quirks that differentiates him from the rest of the characters in Christie’s novels.

3.3 ‘Masked Autism’

As it happens, it is this remarkable distinction that is commonly used to refute Hercule Poirot’s Autism. Being a rather socially adept person and being an expert of the human mind are not stereotypical characteristics that people think of when they revisit their knowledge of Autism. In fact, it is usually the opposite. Antisocial behaviour, lack of empathy, coldness, cruelty, ignorance and crippling vulnerability are some of the dehumanising features that Autistic people embody, in the collective mind. Nevertheless, this conception is false and discriminating. While some Autistic people may fit—to an extent and from a different perspective—these preconceptions, there are many faces to Autism and many details to their behaviours. Dr Price wrote about this in his book:

Every case of Autism is a bit different, and traits can present in seemingly contradictory ways. Some Autistic people can't speak; others are incredibly hypervocal from a young age, with huge vocabularies. Some Autistic people can read people's emotions so easily that it's overwhelming; others empathise with animals or objects, but not people; some of us have zero emotional empathy [...] What unites us, generally speaking, is a bottom-up processing style that impacts every aspect of our lives and how we move through the world, and the myriad practical and social challenges that come with being different. (Price 29)

For this reason, it is possible that someone as different from Sherlock Holmes as Poirot is, could also be somewhere in the Autism Spectrum. Significantly, Poirot is typically excluded from this condition because he is not as clearly antisocial as the stereotypical Autistic, but there is another category in the condition that satisfies his wrongly-contemplated contradictions. Dr Price, in contrast to the stereotypical image of the white, male kid, contemplates the concept of 'Female Autism', a fairly well-known variety of the condition that does not affect women entirely and exclusively, but which helps to understand why women, racialized groups or members of the LGBTQ+ community have been historically less commonly diagnosed. This concept of 'Female Autism' is intimately connected to the exercise of 'masking' that has been previously alluded to in Section 2.2. 'Masking' consists in oppressing the qualities of one's own that would be marked as "abnormal" according to the social norms of neurotypicality. Dr Amy Pearson and Kieran Rose point out that "The social norms of autistic people differ to those of the dominant social group, and "passing as normal" or attempting to pass as normal might relieve external consequences (such as bullying) while increasing internal consequences (such as exhaustion and burnout)" (Pearson & Rose 7), in their

article “A Conceptual Analysis of Autistic Masking: Understanding the Narrative of Stigma and the Illusions of Choice”. Noticeably, masking is also closely related to undiagnosed individuals, namely women, people-of-colour and queer people. For a better understanding of this connection, it is necessary to settle a few details and explanations, the first being that these groups of the population are unequivocally underdiagnosed compared to their opposites—male, white, cisgender and straight. The reason for this lies in the very fact that in a historically patriarchal, male-centred society, anything that escaped the boundaries of the privileged was relegated to the background. Consequently, when an abnormal behaviour is detected in one of the primary individuals, the cause is identified and a diagnosis is reached. Contrarily, when these unsettling behaviours are perceived in an individual from any of the secondary groups, it is either ignored altogether or unjustly blamed on the discriminating preconceptions that exist about each group. Dr Price reflects on this topic and give further illustrative examples:

When Autistic girls engage in self-stimulatory behaviour, it tends to be less physically damaging: less arm biting, more hair twirling or opening and closing a book quietly many times. When Autistic girls are shy and withdrawn, people are less concerned by it than they would be if a boy exhibited the same reticence. On the flip side, when Autistic girls have meltdowns, it tends to get written off as an emotional outburst. When they *do* act out or behave aggressively, they’re more likely to be punished severely for not being ladylike, resulting in them learning to censor their aggression at an earlier age than most boys do. (Price 53-54)

What is more, being an underdiagnosed group is also a predominant risk factor for masking. As Price mentions in the quotation just above, when girls show an

uncommon behaviour, they are more likely to be punished and corrected—instead of being helped and supported as is more probable in cases of diagnosed Autistic children. In other words, they face oppression and find themselves forced to mask. This exercise of camouflaging and masquerading through time is what makes masking individuals generally more socially adept and talkative; which is the main differentiating factor when it comes to the consideration of ‘Female Autism’. Dr Devon Price’s basic definition for this variety is the following:

For years now, psychologists and psychiatrists have discussed the existence of “female Autism”, a supposed subtype that can look a lot milder and socially appropriate than “male” Autism does. People with so-called “female Autism” may be able to make eye contact, carry on a conversation, or hide their tics and sensory activities (Price 7).

Nevertheless, even though the term ‘Female Autism’ has been used in this paper up to this point, it is important to indicate that it might not be the most appropriate term, for it is misleading. While it would seem that this is an anatomical condition of the female population—an argument many experts still use to relegate Autistic women to the background—this variation of the condition actually stems from social issues and affects females and other historically discriminated groups. Also, the concept of ‘high functioning’ Autism is not the most suitable either, for it has a powerful bias towards the other group—the so-called ‘low functioning’ Autism. In exchange, for all these concepts Dr Devon Price suggests the term ‘Masked Autism’.

Despite this important detail, using the ‘female’ term served the purpose of explaining the social component and the function gender roles play in the Autistic world. Furthermore, it cooperates with the development of the next argument that is set

to establish Poirot as an Autistic/Neurodivergent character, his own feminization. While not being a woman, a person of colour or even part of the LGBTQ+ community—as far as we are concerned—, it would seem Poirot is a ‘Masked Autistic’, but since the reader is not provided with any information about his childhood or past trauma, there is no certain reasoning for his ‘masking’. Hence the existence of a theory that suggests that Hercule Poirot is a feminised character that has been excluded from the traditionally canonical principles of masculinity. Following this train of thought, the feminine quality of Poirot’s characterisation encourages the reader to see him as yet another member of the displaced groups in the Autism Spectrum; undiagnosed, ignored and forced to mask away his true nature in exchange for the gift of social abilities and psychological proficiency. In reality, Poirot’s personality is extremely interesting because of its duality and its impossibility to compromise entirely with either masculinity or femininity. His situation is somewhat similar to that of non-binary, transgender or gender non-conforming Autistic people. Being at the crossroads between the two—or in another way, in none-genders, becomes an additional obstacle for these communities, especially when it comes to diagnosis and masking.

3.3.1 The feminisation of Hercule Poirot

Regardless, Hercule Poirot might as well be described as a feminised character. María Lujza Csorba discusses this theory in an essay for the *International Journal of English and Comparative Literary Studies*. For instance, she suggests that Poirot is continuously described as small or ‘petite’ in a way that seems to evade the conventions of masculinity. Also, she mentions the fact that he dyes his hair and even wore a wig for

some time. Alternatively, when Captain Hastings is confronted with similar suggestions, his reaction is that of an outraged man. As Lujza puts it: “Captain Hastings’ reactions to the subject of improving one’s – man’s – hair condition prove that such is not regarded as common, and he does not support it” (Lujza Csorba 15). In addition to this, she also develops a rather interesting point about the symbol of the cat in comparison to Hercule Poirot. She puts forward the idea that Poirot is often depicted as a cat or in comparison to one. She talks about his characteristic eyes that turn green when he has an amusing idea, the simile between his detective exercise and ‘cat-and-mouse game’, and the various moments at which some of the sounds he makes are said to be like cat purrs.

But apart from these points, there are some other very interesting signs that approximate him to the female gender. For one thing, he is thoroughly left aside from the most male-emblematic group in the novels, the police force. Whether it is Scotland Yard, an international police force or local inspectors Poirot is consistently left aside, albeit subtly. This detail can be partially traced back to the fact that he is retired by the first novel, yet it could also be said to be an intentional choice made by Christie to isolate him even further—he also used to belong to the Belgian police force, but not anymore. Nevertheless, Poirot tends to collaborate with the police force to help them solve some mysteries, but even in those occasions he is sometimes noticeably individual and shows a substantial amount of scepticism and lethargy. In contrast to him, his companion Hastings could be thought to express a much higher familiarity and enthusiasm when they reunite with the police figure. Also, in contrast with the figure of the police force or the figure of Hastings, Poirot is exceedingly passive in a way that distances him from the rest of the male characters in the novels. His approach to crime is a very psychological one, in fact, he is well known for his intense passion towards

what he calls “grey cells”—referring to the neurons. As a result, he is not the type of detective to pursue criminals and he very rarely uses intimidating methods to coerce witnesses or suspects into talking. It may be said that his passivity is a conventionally feminine feature. Additionally, apart from this distancing from the male characters and the canons of masculinity, his feminisation is also present in the form of closeness towards the female characters. Among the very few friendships or acquaintances he develops through the novels, there is a considerably higher number of women. He generally shows more sympathy and interest towards female characters, too. Rosalie Otterburne and Jacqueline de Bellefort in *Death on the Nile* (1937), Linda Marshall in *Evil Under the Sun* (1941) or Katherine Grey in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1928) are notable examples of his figurative sorority. And finally, another canonical, recognizable, feminine trait he possesses is his insistence on order and his physical appearance. Poirot is also profoundly known for his obsession with order and his extensive use of the ‘method’ to solve his crimes. Moreover, he is also extra careful to look presentable; like in his strict hair-care routine and the neatness of his moustache. Also, an insistence with order and the need to be pleasing to look at are rather common traits around Autists in general.

4. CONCLUSION

Overall, I believe it could be said that Hercule Poirot is a Neurodivergent character; outstandingly so because of his presumed Autism and OCD. He shares with the Autistic community many of the most general traits that define them, such as his sensitivity to small stimuli and his characteristic need to follow strict rules and habits. His obsession with method and order are the traits of his that define him as atypical and as one of the

most famous fictional detectives. What is more, he stims with regularity and is prone to secrecy as ways to cope with the neurotypical world.

Apart from the rather basic personality traits, representation of his Autism can be seen more figuratively through the presumably conscientious usage that Agatha Christie made of the narrative and fictional elements. Hercule Poirot is hardly ever the narrator or focaliser of the novels in which he is the protagonist. This role is usually enforced by either Captain Hasting, his companion, or by multiple secondary characters from each novel. The exclusion from the narrator can be seen as a symbol of the marginalisation of Poirot in a way that has been conventionally done to any minority like women, people-of-colour, or neurodivergent people. In addition to this, the language barrier also seems like a symbol of miscommunication, as could be the case between neurotypical and neurodiverse people. Nevertheless, the marginalisation of Poirot as a possibly Autistic character goes hand-in-hand with the marginalisation he suffers because of his condition of being a foreigner.

Apart from this, significantly, when Poirot is compared with Sherlock Holmes—another famous detective who is commonly acknowledged as Autistic—he falls behind in terms of obviousness. Poirot's social abilities are noticeably more developed than those of Holmes or any other of the Autistic fictional characters imposed by the media. To explain this, it is necessary to understand the concept of 'Masked Autism', a variety of conventional Autism that usually presents better social skills to the point that it is difficult for many non-familiarised individuals to detect. Here one of the biggest problems of the Autistic community, underdiagnosis, which usually affects women, people-of-colour and queer people. This condition is a social one, that develops itself for the lack of attention and acknowledgement that the affected groups suffer in society. And it is under this discrimination that people with this characteristic tend to mask away

their Autistic nature and develop considerably higher social aptitudes out of necessity. Poirot belongs to this group, and it is symbolised as such in the sense that he lives at the crossroads between masculinity and femininity. Traditionally gender-assigned features such as a short height, sympathy towards order and method and a plausible passivity make Poirot a feminised character that fits the conditions of the ignored and marginalised groups that usually suffer from 'Masked Autism'.

On balance, I would say that Hercule Poirot is an Autistic character that might not have necessarily been designed as such by Agatha Christie, and who is much more subtle in the conventionality of his Autistic traits than others such as Sherlock Holmes. Nevertheless, I believe he conveys what I feel to be a very important message; the variety in Autism and Neurodivergence, and the problematic challenge that is underdiagnosis in the psychological community and society.

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