



**Universidad**  
Zaragoza

## **Trabajo Fin de Grado**

### **A Timeless Murder Mystery: Race, Gender, and Detection in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None***

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Curso 2022-2023

## Abstract

Both society and its sensibilities change with the passing of time. As a consequence of these changes, the classics are revisited and looked at through a modern lens. Agatha Christie –one of the most influential female authors of the Golden Age of detective fiction– and her work are among those that are being re-evaluated by contemporary readers and critics alike. In particular, her novel *And Then There Were None* (1939) has withstood the test of time but the book's treatment of race and gender issues is also being studied from a contemporary perspective, giving rise to heated debates and new interpretations. For instance, the work has been adapted in important respects in order to remove racist language and meanings. This has led, among other changes, to the modification of the original title from *Ten Little Niggers* to *And Then There Were None*. Similarly, this and other novels by Christie are being re-read in connection with feminism. Even if the author obtained success and recognition as a woman writer, her novels contain controversial representations of women in that they fit stereotypical gender roles. There is no agreement on this issue, though, as there are also those that see in her works, and in *And Then There Were None* in particular, female characters that depart from patriarchal constructions of femininity.

This dissertation aims to discuss the reasons for the lasting popularity of the novel by focusing on three main aspects. The first has to do with the novel's adherence to the rules of detective fiction and the way in which Christie plays with convention and innovation, as *And Then There Were None* is a whodunnit but not a typical one in certain respects. The other issues to be dealt with are related to the representation of race in the original work –and how it has been adapted to modern sensibilities towards racism– and the depiction of female characters in a way that fits but also defies traditional gender roles.

## Key words

Agatha Christie, *And Then There Were None*, detective novel, race, gender.

## Resumen

Tanto la sociedad como sus sensibilidades cambian con el paso del tiempo. Como consecuencia de estos cambios, los clásicos de la literatura se releen desde una perspectiva contemporánea. Agatha Christie –una de las autoras más influyentes de la edad de oro de la ficción detectivesca– escribió novelas que se encuentran entre las obras que están siendo ahora reevaluadas por críticos y lectores. En particular, su novela *Y no quedó ninguno* (1939) ha resistido el paso del tiempo y es todavía popular, pero también es cierto que su tratamiento de temas relacionados con el género y la raza está siendo abordado desde puntos de vista más actuales, lo cual ha dado lugar a debates y nuevas interpretaciones. Por ejemplo, ciertos aspectos de la novela se han adaptado para evitar lenguaje y significados racistas. Esto tiene que ver, entre otros cambios, con la modificación del título, que ha pasado de *Diez negritos* a *Y no quedó ninguno*. De forma

similar, esta y otras novelas de Christie están siendo estudiadas desde un enfoque feminista. Si bien la autora consiguió éxito y reconocimiento como escritora, sus novelas contienen representaciones controvertidas de mujeres que se ajustan a roles de género estereotipados. Con todo, no hay consenso en este punto, ya que hay quien ve en sus obras, y en *Y no quedó ninguno* en particular, personajes femeninos que se apartan de la típica construcción patriarcal.

Este Trabajo de Fin de Grado pretende analizar las razones que explican la popularidad continuada de la novela desde su publicación atendiendo a tres aspectos principales de la misma. El primero tiene que ver con cómo la narrativa se ajusta a las convenciones del relato de detectives, ya que la autora consigue un equilibrio entre convención e innovación al hacer de *Y no quedó ninguno* un “whodunit”, si bien uno ciertamente atípico en algunos aspectos. Los otros temas a tratar están relacionados con la representación de la raza en la obra original –y los cambios que ha sufrido para adaptarla a actitudes más modernas en cuanto al racismo– y la construcción de los personajes femeninos, que ilustran pero también cuestionan los roles tradicionales de género.

### **Palabras clave**

Agatha Christie, *Diez negritos*, novela de detectives, raza, género.

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## 1. Introduction

Agatha Christie is widely regarded as one of the most important and influential mystery writers in the history of literature. Her impact on the genre is immeasurable, as she pioneered many of the conventions and tropes that have become synonymous with mystery novels. Christie's works have been translated into over one hundred languages and have sold more than two billion copies worldwide. Her most famous characters, including Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple, have become cultural icons, and her influence can be seen in countless works of literature, television, and film.

Beyond her contributions to the mystery genre, Christie's impact on literature as a whole is significant. She is often credited with popularizing the "whodunit" style of mystery writing, which involves a puzzle that readers can solve alongside the detective. She also introduced many of the tropes and conventions that have become staples of the genre, including the amateur sleuth, the country house setting, and the "red herring" clue. Her works have been widely imitated and adapted, and many contemporary mystery writers cite her as a major influence. She was a master of character development and storytelling, and her ability to craft intricate plots and surprising twists has made her a beloved figure among readers of all kinds. Christie's relevance in literature also lies in her ability to comment on social issues of her time, including class, gender, and race. Her works offer insight into the cultural attitudes and societal norms of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and continue to be studied and appreciated by scholars and readers alike. Her legacy has endured long after her death in 1976, and her impact on literature and popular culture is still felt today.

*And Then There Were None* is one of Christie's most famous novels, in fact it is considered to be the world's best-seller mystery novel of all time and, still today, it is widely acclaimed among not only average readers, but also experts and critics. It was

first published in the UK in 1939 as *Ten Little Niggers*, and some later in the US as *And Then There Were None*. The book has also been published under the titles *Ten Little Indians* and *Murder Island*. The story is set on a remote island off the coast of Devon, England, as ten strangers are invited there by a mysterious host. Upon their arrival, they find that their host is absent, and they are stranded on the island with no way to leave. As the guests settle in, they realize that each of them has been brought to the island under false pretenses. They are all hiding dark secrets from their past and, soon after their arrival, they are each accused of a past crime by an unknown voice over a gramophone recording. The guests begin to suspect that their host has brought them to the island to pay for their crimes. One by one, they start dying in mysterious circumstances, following a pattern based on the nursery rhyme “Ten Little Niggers” (or “Ten Little Indians”, depending on the edition, although there have been changes in this respect that will be discussed later). As the group dwindles, the remaining guests become increasingly paranoid and desperate to find the killer among them until they soon realize that the killer is one of them and they must figure out who s/he is before it is too late. The novel is known for its intricate plot, suspenseful atmosphere, and twist ending, which has become a hallmark of Christie’s work.

How can a 1939 mystery novel be still so popular nowadays? What are the reasons that explain the timeless interest aroused by this work? As a reader that greatly enjoyed this novel, among other works by Christie, I started this dissertation in an attempt to answer these questions. There is no need to say that there are many factors that make *And Then There Were None* such a memorable novel. Given the scope of this dissertation, though, I will approach it from two specific angles that, in my view, may provide reasons accounting for the work’s ongoing significance and interest. They will be addressed separately, in the two sections that follow this Introduction.

In the first place, the novel constitutes a good illustration of the lasting appeal exerted by classic detective fiction. The detective story is formulaic, adhering to rules that are repeated from work to work, but as Cawelti says: “all cultural products contain a mixture of two kinds of elements: conventions and inventions.” (118) *And Then There Were None* can be said to create a perfect balance between these two forces, convention and invention, which will be analyzed in the following section –on how the novel adheres to the genre and what the author brings to it, also in the sense of how it differs from what would be the basic formula. This balance has much to do with the success of the novel among readers from different periods.

In the second place, there is the fact that some stories withstand the test of time better than others depending, to an important extent, on their ability to contribute to current developments in topics of interest as well as to contemporary debates on controversial issues. The passage of time changes the sensitivity of society and readers with regard to certain themes, such as race or gender. Now, works can be approached from a necessarily different perspective than that in the author’s time, so new readings emerge that make the novel not lose its interest and its ability to make us reflect on important issues of life and literature. More specifically, the way in which race and gender are dealt with in *And Then There Were None* is problematic by modern standards, and can be seen as perpetuating harmful stereotypes and biases. However, it is worth noting that the book was written in 1939, when attitudes towards race and gender were very different than they are today. This does provide some historical context for the representation of the said issues and, at the same time, it opens possibilities when it comes to discussing the novel’s treatment of them in the light of contemporary views and critical approaches. This will be the focus of this dissertation’s third section.

In recent years, some publishers have released updated editions of the novel – whose earlier title was already deemed problematic long ago– that remove what is perceived as racially offensive language and imagery. While these updates may be seen as a step in the right direction, they have also caused heated debates: Is it correct to change a novel written over a century ago? Is it really ethical? Similarly, with respect to gender issues, this and other novels by Christie do indeed contain stereotypes that the modern reader will surely be critical with. And yet, Christie’s work is also undergoing a feminist reassessment. The question arises, then, as to how *And Then There Were None* can contribute to the debates on Christie’s conservatism or feminism: How are female characters portrayed in the novel? How is it concerned with gender norms and relations? Does it support or disrupt the status quo of gender roles in Christie’s time?

Having stated here the main aims of my dissertation, as well as the structure and the focus of my study of the novel, I will now move on to the analysis proper.

## **2. The Whodunit Mystery: Convention and Innovation in *And Then There Were None***

Agatha Christie is regarded as one of the most important and influential detective fiction writers of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. She followed in her works the classical ratiocinative design of the genre, and therefore contributed to perfecting a formula whose origins can be traced back to the previous century. Detective fiction as a genre was first articulated by the American Edgar Allan Poe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. “The Murders in the Rue Morgue” (1841) is generally considered to be the first modern detective story. It features Dupin, the brilliant detective who uses logical deduction to solve a seemingly impossible crime. Poe, who was quite interested in theories of writing, defined the elements of the detective formula that have been considered by many as the basis of the genre. As Cawelti explains, these aspects are four: situation, a crime that needs to be solved,



usually a murder; patterns of action, the detective's investigation and solution of the crime; characters and relationships; and setting (Cawelti 80-98). In Poe's definition, the story requires four main character roles: the victim, the criminal, the detective, and those threatened by the crime but incapable of solving it. These characters have to move along in a specific type of setting that adds suspense to the story, and in this respect the island in *And Then There Were None* is a good example. Crime conventionally occurs in an isolated place, which abstracts the story from the complexity and confusion of the larger social world and provides a reason for avoiding more complex issues of social injustice and group conflict that form the basis of more realistic fiction (97). Indeed, Christie's favorite situation/setting is what has come to be called "the closed circle". It ranges from an airplane in flight in *Death in the Clouds*, to an island off England's south coast in *Evil Under the Sun*, or a group of strangers brought together by apparent chance, as in *And Then There Were None* (Bargainnier 22).

The formula described above has been repeated through time, and yet, it is not entirely fixed, it has changed and has been reinvented, for example, by mixing it with adventure and melodrama, and by evolving into new genres like the hard-boiled detective story, the spy story, the police procedural tale, the gangster saga.... As Delamater and Prigozy argue "the genre's 'game rule' structure constantly provides the opportunity to subvert the formulas", as is amply illustrated by postmodern detective fiction (2). Besides, the classical formula is related to a distinctive historical period and reflects attitudes and interests that are no longer as widespread as they were (Cawelti 80), but it has always adapted to changing societal contexts and reader expectations. The conventions established by Poe were refined by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, responsible for the creation of the most iconic figure in detective fiction, Sherlock Holmes. The first Holmes adventure, *A Study in Scarlet* (1881), captivated readers and

set the stage for countless detective stories to come thanks to Dupin's sharp intellect, keen observation skills and use of forensic science. Holmes's stories expressed social values and ideologies that were generally conservative: Doyle's attitudes affirmed most of the values of traditional British culture by making his characters the embodiment of morality (Delamater and Prigozy 5). The early 20<sup>th</sup> century became the "Golden Age" of detective fiction, characterized by intricate puzzles, clever plots and a focus on fair play that brought innovation to conventions, being Agatha Christie one of the most prominent authors. After that, in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, the genre continued to evolve and a contrasting style emerged in the form of hard-boiled detective fiction, which "revolutionized the genre by creating a plebeian detective with subversive undertones" (Delamater and Prigozy 6). Authors like Raymond Chandler, creator of Philip Marlowe, used a darker and more realistic tone to depict morally complex detectives operating in an urban environment. It cannot be denied that detective fiction has remained diverse and vibrant over time, and its popularity is a proof of the enduring appeal of mysteries and the allure of enigmatic detectives.

Even though the formula has not always been replicated exactly, authors such as Doyle and Christie largely based their work on Poe's detective stories. However, it must be noted that there has always been an element of subversion in the genre, possibly going back to the mixture of rationality and decadence that Poe built into his original creation (Delamater and Prigozy 6). Authors have logically combined the detective formula with original elements of plot and narrative that prevented their works from being predictable. Moreover, authors can subvert expectations by introducing unconventional story-telling techniques and plot elements that challenge traditional structures in order to keep the genre being dynamic and engaging. As Todorov claims, every great book establishes the existence of two genres, the reality of two norms: the

genre it transgresses and the one it creates (138). In *And Then There Were None* Christie follows and also plays with the conventions of the genre by adding new elements that challenge pre-established traits and partly transgress the formula, as will be shown in what follows.

First of all, and focusing on the fact that in this novel there are several crimes that need to be solved, the narrative can be said to depart from the classical “whodunit plot”. In “The Typology of Detective Fiction”, first published in 1966, Todorov explains that this type of narrative is characterized by the combination of two “stories”: the story of the crime, which happens before the investigation starts, and the story of the investigation, which moves towards the reconstruction of the crime that precedes it. In the case of the novel that is being analyzed, the investigation happens in parallel with the several crimes committed throughout the story. There is no distance between the temporality of the actions (murders and investigation), which makes the narrative closer to the thriller plot where the two story lines are fused. As explained in the Introduction, the novel begins with a group of ten strangers who are lured to an island only to discover that they are trapped and accused of different crimes. According to Todorov, detective stories must include at least one detective, one criminal and one victim (142). Christie’s novel lacks a traditional detective figure, instead the characters themselves take on the role of detectives. It could indeed be said that the narrative follows the pattern of the “suspect-as-detective” story. The ten main characters conclude, after exhaustively looking around the island, that there is no one else there, which means that the criminal is one of them. They reach the point when they do not even hide their suspicion: “Five people—five frightened people. Five people who watched each other, who now hardly troubled to hide the state of their nervous tension. There was little pretense now....They were five enemies linked together by a mutual instinct of self-

preservation.” (Christie 174) Each character is (or pretends to be) a possible victim and s/he also regards the other characters as possible murderers. All are at the same level, all are suspects, all can be victims, and all become (amateur) detectives. The reader’s attempts to decipher the mystery run parallel to the characters’ effort to spot the murderer before they are killed. They can all die, and the reader guesses that all of them will, in contrast with the classical detective story in which there is at least immunity for the detective. The isolated and claustrophobic setting also contributes to the suspense and the effective creation of a closed-circle scenario, which increases the tension among the characters.

The ten characters are a key part of the novel, and also a vehicle for challenging conventions. To begin with, there is no clear protagonist, even if there are a couple of characters, Vera Claythorne and Philip Lombard, that stand out because they are the most fully developed, and, in addition, they outlive almost everyone else. Normally, the narrator is made to coincide with one of the characters in order to have events told from a specific perspective that is restricted to the views of one individual, and therefore contributes to keeping suspense since this character cannot reveal what s/he does not know. However, in this case the narrator is omniscient and the point of view constantly shifts back and forth between each of the ten characters, which accounts for the novel’s structure in the form of short chapters. The fact that the narrator is omniscient does not make it entirely reliable, but it allows for an internal presentation of the guests on the island in a way that delves into their psychology, exploring in particular their sense of guilt and concept of justice. This psychological exploration is another element that departs from the detective fiction formula, as the rule states that there is “no place for descriptions or psychological analyses.” (Todorov 142) In Christie’s novel, characters are accused of a crime they were involved with in the past, which confronts them with

their dark secrets. The author explores the themes of conscience, remorse and punishment, adding an extra psychological level to the narrative. Vera Claythorne, in particular, is interestingly developed as a character and I believe she is the one more psychologically exposed. There are several episodes in which she has visions and nightmares related to her past crime, committed when she worked as a governess and let a child, Cyril, die by drowning for economic interest, as his death benefitted Hugo, her lover: “‘You can go to the rock, Cyril....’ That was what murder was—as easy as that! But afterwards you went on remembering.... She climbed up on the chair, her eyes staring in front of her like a sleepwalker’s... She adjusted the noose round her neck. Hugo was there to see she did what she had to do. She kicked away the chair...” (Christie 223). The focus on Vera’s mental state allows the reader to understand her evolution and final breakdown: as shown in the quotation, her strong guilty feelings and her increasing fear lead her to commit suicide at the end of the novel.

Guilt is a very interesting theme in *And Then There Were None*. According to Cawelti, the convention in detective fiction is to externalize and objectify guilt, projecting it onto the least-likely person, who is proved to be the guilty one at the end of the story. Guilt is only attributed to one specific individual character (96). Nevertheless, as explained above, this is not the case in Christie’s novel. It is true that there is only one character responsible for the murders in the story, but all of them are responsible for other past crimes. This makes it difficult for the reader to empathize with any of them. Christie breaks again with the convention in that the characters play two roles, victim and executioner. The book introduces an element of moral ambiguity that challenges the traditional notions of right and wrong, since the characters’ past crimes, while varying in seriousness, blur the line between victims and perpetrators. This raises questions about justice, the consequences of one’s actions and the potential of redemption.

Typically, the criminal's identity has to be discovered not only to provide readers with answers but, above all, to restore justice. Justice plays a crucial role as the driving force behind the actions of the characters, and so, it is relevant formally, as what sets the narrative in motion and what closes it, and also thematically, as an issue explored by the author. Justice is often depicted as the ultimate goal of the story, what restores order and balance. The detective acts as an agent of justice, working to ensure that the guilty ones are held accountable for their actions.

In *And Then There Were None*, as already mentioned, there is no detective and the characters' ultimate goal is not discovering who the killer is in order to make justice and punish him, but to save themselves and avoid being killed. For that reason, the reader would think there is no one seeking justice, but that is not true: actually, there is one character that wants justice to be made and, surprisingly, that is the murderer. Mr. Justice Wargrave, who is interestingly a judge, wants to punish a group of criminals that escaped punishment for their crimes. Before retiring, he was known for his harshness when dictating sentences, which would make him a good detective figure, using his experience with the criminal mind to unmask the killer. The other characters actually rely on him as their leader –until he is supposedly killed– as he shows a confidence-inspiring rationality in moments of crisis. But, as the reader learns at the end of the novel, when a local fisherman finds his written confession, Wargrave was the murderer. Through this letter, it is revealed that he planned everything, selecting his ten victims, buying the island, pretending to be one of the group, and also faking his death early in the story in order to continue killing. Obsessed with justice, he did all this to fulfil his desire to punish those who deserve it. In the detective tradition, making justice is right and fair, but Wargrave decides to take the law into his own hands when he becomes aware that he suffers from an incurable illness and will die soon. He is not a

disinterested agent of justice, Wargrave is a sadist that takes pleasure in killing and, consequently, the reader does not see him as a sympathetic character. Wargrave states in his confession letter that it is his wish to spare innocents from suffering and to punish guilty individuals: “I wanted to kill... Yes, I wanted to kill... But –incongruous as it may seem to some– I was restrained and hampered by my innate sense of justice. The innocent must not suffer.” (Christie 239) And yet, the methods he uses are questionable as he never shows any mercy. Instead, he regards his victims as pawns in order to create his perfect killing spree. In Christie’s exploration of the line that divides those who act unjustly and those who seek to restore justice, it turns out that Wargrave’s victims, despite breaking the rules of moral behavior in the past, are far more likeable than Wargrave himself, as he is cruel and likely insane.

Typically, the novel concludes with the revelation of the murderer’s identity, the explanation of his motives and the details of his actions. In a classical detective story, this explanation would be given by the detective, whose objective is to uncover all the truth to the rest of characters and the reader. Todorov states that there is a possibility the detective may fail to discover the criminal and that, in this case, a sealed envelope pasted on the last pages will give the answer to the puzzle (140-141). Christie makes use of this resource at the end of the novel, with Wargrave writing his “confession, enclosing it in a bottle, sealing the latter, and casting it to the waves.” (Christie 237) Although police officers arrive at the island when all the characters are dead to try and find out what happened there, they are unable to solve the complex and intricate puzzle: ““But in that case,’ he said, ‘who killed them?’” (Christie 236) The reader seems to get no answers, but then, a document written by the murderer turns up that retrospectively explains the whole procedure of the murders. This explanation is both rational and logical, and therefore in tune with the classical formula (Todorov 142). And yet, justice

does not win in this novel: Wargrave's own sense of justice goes beyond the law since, being already dead, the criminal cannot be punished.

As we have seen, *And Then There Were None* combines a unique plot structure, psychological suspense, an intricate puzzle and thought-provoking moral dilemmas. The novel guarantees the fulfillment of conventional expectations but also plays with the genre's rules to make room for innovation, thus contributing to the enduring popularity of a type of fiction that has proved to be always able to evolve and change into new forms.

### **3. Contemporary Perspectives on Christie's Novel**

Apart from the novel's intricate and cleverly woven plot, there are other reasons that account for the enduring interest raised by Christie's *And Then There Were None*. The development of literary criticism, but also the changing ways of understanding the world with the passing of time, explain why critics devote themselves more and more to re-reading books from the past in order to examine them through different, more contemporary lenses, like those provided by postcolonial, feminist, race and other kinds of criticism. This is also the case with *And Then There Were None*. Since Christie wrote the novel in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, things have considerably changed, and this has led to new readings. In line with this, I will focus in what follows on two specific themes and its relevance to contemporary interpretations of the novel: race and gender issues.

#### **3.1. Race in *And Then There Were None***

When analyzing the novel in terms of race, it is worth noting that, at first, it may seem as a not too relevant theme due to the lack of racial diversity in the story. All characters in *And Then There Were None* are white and English. This reflects the time when it was



written, as racial representation was not commonly addressed in mainstream literature. But then, why has there been a debate over race in connection with the novel? In this case, the controversy is more related to offensive language and the racist connotations of some elements in the narrative. These elements have been modified, raising the question of whether these changes are right and should be welcomed as politically correct, or whether they are rather an unacceptable intromission in the author's creative freedom. What cannot be denied is that race is an important theme in the novel, and understanding the role it plays in the story is crucial in order to activate the colonial subtext of the original narrative. The colonial or racist references appear in four main ways: the nursery rhyme used as a title and an element of the plot, the ten figurines, the setting (Negro Island), and lastly, Lombard and his crime, related to his colonial mission and how he was responsible for the death of twenty one African natives.

The original title of the novel was *Ten Little Niggers*. As Joel Eisenberg explains, it came from a nursery rhyme entitled "Ten Little Indians", later adapted for a song intended for a minstrel show and entitled "Ten Little Injuns" (Injuns = Native American Indians). The British version changed the lyrics and the title, which became "Ten Little Niggers". It was in this form that it served Christie as inspiration. In some places, the novel's original title was changed to *Ten Little Indians* because at that time this alternative was considered less racist, even if now we see it as equally objectionable. *And Then There Were None* (the last line of the song) was used for the first US edition in 1940, although later releases appeared as *Ten Little Indians* (it seems that offending the Native American population was thought to be less problematic than offending African Americans). Later on, the title was changed in almost every country to what is its current title, *And Then There Were None*, with some exceptions such as Spain, which maintained the original translated title for a long time. The song is

relevant due to the fact that it functions as a sort of guide for the murders, heightening the tension and creating a sense of foreboding. The ten characters who are on the island are killed following the lyrics of the song, which starts in a way that describes the first death: “Ten little niggers went out to dine;/ One choked his little self and then there were nine.” And so on. In addition, ten figurines start to disappear one by one coinciding with the deaths of the characters, until there are none.

The title was not the only element that changed. There are a few more details that vary in different editions, for example the above-mentioned figurines. Originally, they were black, matching Christie’s original title, then they became Indians in those editions entitled *Ten Little Indians* and, lastly, with the change to *And Then There Were None*, they are represented as soldiers (or sailors) and the rhyme’s title is, accordingly, “Ten Little Soldiers”. Moreover, the name of the setting also shifted, from Negro Island to Indian Island, and then to Soldier (or Sailor) Island. These changes may seem irrelevant, intended to replace what can be considered as racist slurs that reflect the mind-set of imperial Britain, but they affect the narrative in more relevant ways than it may initially seem.

To begin with, these modifications should be approached in connection with a trend aiming to “rectify” works and ensure they align with contemporary values that promote inclusivity, respect and cultural sensitivity. Nevertheless, it is equally important to keep in mind the historical, social, and cultural moment when a work was written in order to understand it better. Obviously, many of the works written in the past do not reflect contemporary social values because society evolves and awareness regarding certain issues is increased, but it is not necessary to change the works themselves. Rather, they should be analyzed and criticized from a 21<sup>st</sup>-century

perspective. Sometimes these changes cause the loss of implied meanings that made the work much more interesting, as is the case with Christie's novel.

As explained in the previous section, in *And Then There Were None* each character is both a perpetrator and a victim, and they are related by the murderer to both the black figurines and the characters in the rhyme –the “ten little niggers” of the song. This song thus becomes a mocking countdown that leads the guests to mental breakdown. At the beginning neither of them sees him/herself as a criminal and that has much to do with the fact they are all white, British and respectable. Most of the characters represent figures of moral authority in British society, there is a judge, a police officer, a teacher, etc. They do not believe their past actions qualify as murder or serious crime. The most interesting character in this sense is Lombard. The murderer thought his crime to be atrocious, and that is why he is one of the last characters to die, but the rest of the characters see things differently mainly because Lombard's victims were natives. As they are not white, it seems okay for them to lose their lives in order to save Lombard's, who places himself on a superior level: “Self-preservation's a man's first duty. And natives don't mind dying, you know. They don't feel about it as Europeans do.” (Christie 67) This highlights the ironic way in which the rhyme and the figurines relate the characters to black natives, who were considered uncivilized savages in the colonial discourse. The nursery rhyme does not only foreshadow the death of the characters, but also represents moral judgement in a way that aligns British characters that seem respectable to what they saw as savages. Even though nowadays it is considered rather racist and offensive to think of natives as savages, it is important to keep in mind once again the time when the novel was written and the fact that its characters are grown-ups who were born at the peak of British Imperialism. Unsurprisingly, then, they are convinced that the whites are superior and have the divine

duty to civilize and educate the natives from the colonies. Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden" (1899) clearly represents the British imperial mind-set, which Christie's novel illustrates in some respects. Interestingly, though, the novel also shows how the crimes the characters committed in the past subvert the idea of their moral superiority. If they represent British society, it turns out that they appear more morally debased than those they (wrongly) consider to be so just because of their skin color. Changing the nursery rhyme to refer to soldiers, and the figurines too, erases this subtext –the figure of the soldier was considered as highly honorable at the time, which makes the original moral critique lose its power ("Crime and Colonialism").

Race subtly creates an atmosphere of Otherness that haunts the characters and adds an extra level of mystery. The setting, Negro Island, is worth approaching in this light. It is called this way due to the fact it has the shape of a black native's head. This activates a racial and colonial subtext that, again, gets lost if it is changed to "Soldier Island". According to Edward Said in his work *Orientalism* (1978), the Western world perceives the East under false cultural representations which are used to justify the colonial enterprise. The Eurocentric prejudice projects upon other cultures its fantasies and fears. In the novel, Negro Island is "the Other" upon which the characters project both their desires and their most hidden fears. First of all, the island is described as a mysterious place that was once owned by a millionaire. Nobody really knew what happened on that island, and the fact that they are going to finally see it makes the characters dream about and imagine what they will find there. In the first pages of the novel, the point of view changes from one character to the other as they fantasize and think about who and why invited them there. For them the island is something exotic, different from their everyday lives and that raises curiosity: "Soldier Island! Why, there had been nothing else in the papers lately! All sorts of hints and interesting rumours."

(Christie 3) However, the atmosphere of Otherness, related to the connotations of the place's name in Christie's original version, eventually transforms the place, which changes from exotic and appealing to claustrophobic and maddening. As the story advances, the setting slowly becomes a cage from where the characters cannot escape. First, they try to find the murderer, but they soon realize the killer is among them, meaning that one of them is what they consider "the Other".

Otherness is everywhere, but its impact decreases drastically if changes are made to the name of the setting, the nursery rhyme hanged on the wall of all the guests' rooms, and the figurines. As Doyle states, through "the colonialist language, the original novel exposes that the murderer/victims are in part relying on their own trumped-up conception of themselves as British and white and therefore superior, to help them deny their own guilt." The story reaches its climax when Vera Claythorne admits her crime and declares that she is as guilty as the killer. Vera always thinks about "the other people" and how they are capable of horrible acts, therefore excluding herself from that possibility: "Vera lifted her face from her hands. She said, staring at him, 'You left them—to die?' Lombard answered, 'I left them to die.' His amused eyes looked into her horrified ones." (Christie 55 ) Ironically, she feels horrified by Lombard's crime when hers is not too different, as she also let someone die, a small child in her case. Lombard, but also Vera and the other characters believe black people, like the African natives Lombard sacrificed, were savages due to the fact they were uncivilized and therefore likely criminals. However, Wargrave shows how hypocritical these characters are by using the figures of "black savages" as representations of them, comparing their crimes to what they considered so unworthy of mercy. At the end, as Vera recognizes herself as "the Other" –the "other people" she distanced herself from– the shock of this recognition becomes so unbearable that she hangs herself. This ending is quite effective

and apposite in terms of narrative structure, as the murderer and the haunting atmosphere of the place drive Vera, the last survivor, to take her life in a way that closes and completes the deaths enumerated in the nursery rhyme: “One little nigger left all alone;/ He went and hanged himself and then there were none.”

### **3.2. Gender in *And Then There Were None***

Apart from the revaluation of the novel in terms of race, *And Then There Were None* can also be analyzed from a gender perspective. Agatha Christie is nowadays considered by some as a feminist icon, she was a prolific writer, an independent woman who won fame and success as an author at a time when literary works by female writers were not regarded as serious. She lived in a patriarchal society where women writers faced many challenges in both publishing their work and gaining recognition, as they had never been part of the canon. With the passing of time and the progress of feminism, society has evolved into a more open-minded one, with greater equality between genders. Feminist literary critics have been struggling to include female authors in the canon, women who were excluded from it due to sexist ideology: “In recent years, the debate about what has become known as the ‘canon’ of English and American literature has dominated literary criticism and much of the debate has involved exploring literature created by women.” (Delameter and Prigozy 5) Detective fiction was one of the few genres where female writers could make a literary career, for example Agatha Christie, who was as important as many of her male counterparts in the Golden Age of detective fiction. Although it may sound as a step towards improvement, the reason behind it is also a bit sexist. Delameter and Prigozy state that the detective story in the early days attracted women writers because detective fiction was an area of literature considered to be mere entertainment and, for that reason, it was more open to women than “serious” literature (5). But then, women had a considerable influence on

the development of the detective story and it is a woman, Christie, who has become the best-selling detective story author of all time (6). Nevertheless, despite the fact that Christie may be seen as a feminist icon nowadays, her work is being analyzed in terms of the portrayal of gender and the debate is open on whether she could actually be considered as a feminist advocate.

Detective fiction has always been linked to patriarchal values due to the fact that it has traditionally been a male-dominated genre. Most of the best-known detectives are men, such as Sherlock Holmes or Hercules Poirot, and the hard-boiled subgenre had a distinctively antifeminist and even misogynistic animus (Delameter and Prigozy 6). According to Gleenwood Irons, though, it can no longer be argued that the image the popular imagination has of the detective is that of a male (12). Christie created a female detective herself, Miss Marple, who even convinced many that the “spinster sleuth” was the quintessential representation of female ratiocination (13). In the past thirty years or so there has been an increase in the creation of women detectives who are outgoing, aggressive and self-sufficient. They have transcended generic codes and reshaped the archetypal male detective from a female perspective (14). Nevertheless, Irons concludes, it cannot be denied that women detectives have been rare in British mystery fiction, and they have usually acted as secondary characters (17).

Christie’s portrayal of gender reflects the values of her time. She grew up during the Victorian period, in a strictly patriarchal society, although feminism was already becoming more popular. Her work is controversial as it divides opinions, is she a feminist or is she not? Some think that her representation of women is rather conservative but, as mentioned earlier, the time when she wrote her novels must be taken into account, as the acceptance of feminism was not as widespread as nowadays. And yet, her female characters evolved through time, reflecting the changing societal

norms and conventions, and also as a consequence of her growth as an author. Critics such as Stephen Knight (*Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, 1980) point out that Christie conducted a complex inquiry in the construction of a gendered methodology of detection, recognizing in this way her contribution to Golden Age detective fiction but also claiming her to be “a genuine channel for the anxieties and the ultimate self-consolation of her class and sex.”(qtd. in Hoffman 4) Nevertheless, some other critics have discussed the fact that Christie may have displayed feminist intentions in creating deadly women at a time when most genre fiction portrayed men as murderers and, like Warren, see Christie’s “brand of feminism” as more complex than it seems, “allow[ing] for compassion not only for women as victims, but also for women as victimizers.” (54)

In *And Then There Were None* gender issues add an extra level of complexity to the novel that is worth analyzing. The book features a large group of characters, but there are only three females: Mrs. Rogers, Emily Brent, and Vera Claythorne. All have more or less the same level of participation, in the sense that there is no real protagonist and the perspective shifts from one character to another. Out of the three, Mrs. Rogers is the one with less relevance, as she appears just at the beginning –she dies early in the story– and her interventions are not very important. For her part, Emily Brent does have a stronger presence in the novel, but it is Vera that is considered to be one of the most relevant figures due to her development throughout the story. She is in fact the character that outlives the rest and reaches the end of the novel.

Although the seriousness of their crimes determines the order in which the characters die, or so Wargrave claims in his confession, there is good reason for thinking that “Christie the author has also structured it so that the most interesting characters survive the longest—there’s Vera, whose grappling with her own guilt is the central moral question of the story.” (Doyle 2022) It is not difficult to see Vera as a



character that enjoys Christie's sympathies and becomes the novel's de facto protagonist (Warren 55), her mental processes being portrayed in greater detail through stream-of-consciousness techniques. In addition, Christie makes her likeable. She is kind, polite, capable, and attractive, among other positive traits which set her apart from the rest of the characters, especially the female ones (55). However, in spite of her favorable portrayal, she is still a deadly woman as in her previous employment she let little Cyril get drown in order that his relative Hugo, whom she loved, could inherit the entire estate. Something that makes her interesting as a female character is her departure from the stereotypes common in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Traditionally, women (in literature as in life) were expected to care for children, nurture them, and comply with the demands of men. Marriage and motherhood were at the time the final goal of a woman, which made her life meaningful and fulfilling. However, Vera defies these stereotypes by being responsible for a child's death and, by lacking any maternal instinct, she betrays her gender (Warren 54). Her survival until the end of the story bears witness to her exceptional wit and intelligence. Unlike the meek and passive female stereotype, Vera is depicted as courageous and independent. She even displays the audacity to seize Philip Lombard's gun and shoot him in self-defense. However, the male characters underestimate her and her abilities due to the fact that she is a woman and, for the same reason, at the beginning, they cannot imagine her to be capable of committing a crime: "Do I understand you to assert that women are not subject to homicidal mania?" Lombard said irritably: 'Of course not. But all the same, it hardly seems possible.'" (Christie 126) Female characters are constructed as passive by the male ones, and so, Emily Brent is not considered to be a possible murderer, either, just because she is not a man. She is a character that fails to fit gender stereotypes, like Vera, as she is opinionated, self-confident, and holds no regret about her actions. As Warren

explains (53), the male characters agree on not taking women into account as suspects (“I suppose you’ll leave the women out of it”), but the novel states from the beginning that women are capable of killing as they were already guilty before they arrived at the island.

*And Then There Were None* defies gender expectations by warning readers that even the most likeable women can be corrupted by the economic, legal, and cultural restrictions placed upon their gender (Warren 60). The narrative also serves as an example of the ability of Christie’s characters to evolve in terms of gender representation. Although at first the women in the novel seem to comply with gender norms, as the story progresses the reader gets to know them better and realizes there is greater complexity in the construction of female figures, especially Vera. She contributes to giving relevance and importance to the minority of women characters in the novel and shows that Christie female portraits can provide perspectives on gender that are different from what was common in detective fiction written in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Agatha Christie’s career and lasting success are good proof that female authors can endure the passing of time by creating appealing stories which are appreciated by both average readers and scholars. Her contribution to detective fiction accounts for her being one of the most relevant representatives of the genre. *And Then There Were None* has been regarded as her masterpiece since its publication in 1939 and, indeed, it is the world’s best-seller mystery novel. This work has aroused an abiding interest due to various factors, such as the lasting appeal exerted by classic detective fiction and the novel’s innovative features in terms of genre. Also contributing to its prevalence are the

re-reading and re-interpretation of certain issues such as race and gender, which has led to debates in the light of contemporary views and modern critical approaches.

Detective fiction is a considerably fixed genre, and a narrative is expected to comply with a set of well-known rules in order to be labelled as a “Mystery and Detection” novel. However, since its origins, several authors have made innovations aimed to improve the genre and keep it alive, being Christie one of them. *And Then There Were None* is the perfect example of a good balance between convention and innovation as it follows and also departs from the typical whodunit. The novel contains a large variety of characters that are presented through action and conversation, but also by giving the reader direct access to their thoughts; there is no detective that solves the puzzle and ensures justice is made; we find several murders to the point that all characters die; and the story’s approach to guilt and justice is really through-provoking. In sum, the novel’s play with conventional expectations and innovation contributes to its long-lasting popularity.

In addition to the stated above, the re-reading of the novel in the light of contemporary views of race and gender has helped kindle greater interest in this work. Society evolves and so does literary criticism, which accounts for the changing attitudes towards and understanding of controversial topics in literature. *And Then There Were None* leaves room for the study of these two themes and their relevance to present-day interpretations. Firstly, the presence of race prejudice and racist slurs in the novel has provoked heated debates about the narrative’s internalized racism, leading to changes affecting the title and other elements of the plot. However, these changes may have resulted in the loss of some important messages in the novel related to colonialism and the ideology that supported it. Secondly, the representation of gender relations in Christie’s novels has additionally placed the author in the middle of critical discussions,

especially those related to feminism and feminist criticism. Christie created Miss Marple, a female detective that has gained world-wide recognition, and yet, her female characters usually match the gender expectations typical of the early 20th century, which are nowadays considered sexist and sometimes even misogynistic. This applies to *And Then There Were None*, but even if the female characters are a noticeable minority here, the portrayal of women in this novel can be considered subversive in important respects due to the departure from the gender stereotypes prevalent at the time when the work was published.

To conclude, *And Then There Were None* has remained popular through the years and will probably continue to do so in the future thanks to its ability to entertain and surprise the reader, while also making him/her reflect, simultaneously, about the significance of serious issues that have changed with time, but that are still central to society and to the way we understand life and our relation to others.

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