The Culinary Space: Food as a Narrative Tool in Agatha Christie's Detective Novels

Prerana Chakravarty
Tezpur University, India

Abstract

Kevin Burton Smith in his article 'Murder on the Menu' (2010), comments, "right from the start there's been a curious link between food (and drink) and crime fiction." Despite the fact that culinary mystery novels arose as a subgenre of crime fiction in the late twentieth century, food has always been a part of crime fiction, and has played an important role in the early stories of Sherlock Holmes and Edgar Allan Poe. Food is frequently depicted as a source of stability and order in crime novels, establishing verisimilitude, creating a genuine world, a world as we know it. Agatha Christie, too, has included significant reference to food, eating habits and food rituals throughout her detective stories, using it as a tool to create a feminine and domestic space. This paper will analyze how Christie has used the depiction of food as a tool to further the narrative, portraying it in her novels as a calming ritual and a clue to the murder. However, food in Christie's stories can also gain a more sinister undertone, and this paper will also analyze this, focusing on how Christie transforms food into a murder weapon itself, as a bad omen indicating events, thereby, blending reality with the storyline and lending vivacity to her characters and her plots.

Keywords: Crime, Clue-puzzle, Food, Murder

Introduction

Here is sleep and solace and soothing, of pain—

Courage and vigour new!

Here is menace and murder and sudden death!

In these phials of green and blue.

Beware of the Powers that never die

Though men may go their way,

The Power of the Drug, for good or ill,

Shall it ever pass away?

— from "In the Dispensary" by Agatha Christie

The detective story has developed into a fascinating genre throughout time. Few critics have focused on the similarities between food and crime fiction, despite the fact that the genre has been able to win the praise of many distinguished academics and critics. Food studies became increasingly popular in the humanities over the twentieth century. Food has traditionally been seen as the purview of women and has long been disregarded by academia because, according to Western philosophy, food pertains to the inferior world of the body and the physical rather than the superior world of the mind and the ideal. As a result, it is viewed as unworthy of serious attention, profane, and involving bodily pleasures and must be suppressed, whereas research which appealed to the mind, has long been seen as a masculine pursuit. The mind and the body have been divided in Western philosophy since Plato's time. In his hierarchical view of the world, Plato ignored the body and the physical. He regarded ideas as preeminent, while the bodily senses and bodily pleasures were given a lower status and were not worthy of serious consideration. Plato’s disciple, Aristotle, who adopted Plato’s dichotomy, created a clear distinction between pleasures of the body and those of the spirit, such as love, of honour and learning. He also distinguished between pleasures derived from the senses of sight, hearing, smell and between those derived from taste and touch, which he considered the basest of all bodily senses. Later, medieval philosophers and scholars of Christian tradition adopted this distinction. Thomas Aquinas adhered to the Platonic and Aristotelian schools of thought as well. Like them, he too believed that enjoying one's body through touch and taste was barbaric, animal-like, and needed to be restrained by reason. He also established the distinction between gluttony, which in his view was a sin, and fasting, which is a religious activity required to purify the body.

Other thinkers, on the other hand, disagreed with Plato, Aristotle, and Aquinas' separation of the intellect and body. Conversely, some philosophers made food the main topic

of their theories. One of the earliest examples is found in Epicurus' writings, who explicitly opposed Plato's denial of the body and its impulses. According to Epicurus' philosophy, eating is the starting point for all thinking. One of the main tenets of Epicurus's theory that distinguished him from earlier practitioners of body philosophy was his reverence for the physical world and the senses, as well as his promotion of pleasure. In 1894, Louis Bourdeau published his book *Histoire de l'alimentation,* where he called for more scholarly attention to food studies, however, food scholarship remained scarce, only beginning to gain momentum in the twentieth century.

Although food and eating practices are mentioned in ancient documents, studying food is a more recent development. Many academics used food as a tool to study socio-economic behavior as an evolutionary marker of change over extended stretches of time, and had concentrated particularly on the important part that food plays in the study of social history. For instance, food is frequently cited by academics as a major factor in the evolution of mass markets or the fluctuating cost of living. From structuralists to functionalists, a large number of sociologists and anthropologists developed an interest in food over the twentieth century. The structuralists, were interested in the deeper implications of eating behavior, such as how taste is influenced and controlled by social and cultural factors. The structuralist, Roland Barthes, viewed food as a system of signs and offered commentary on the creation and upkeep of specific mythologies in his native France. One such myth relates to the idea that drinking wine is a totemic activity in France and thus serves as a representation of the country. Anthropologists, on the other hand, investigated and argued over the question of whether culture is rooted in actual, material objects. They explored how people's religious activities and rituals affected their eating patterns and concentrated on how people made food choices. In his book *The Raw and the Cooked* (1979), the anthropologist Claude Levi Strauss examined the

oppositionality of food items like raw, cooked, and rotten. He also examined how food is used as a symbol in our culture. He claimed that some food-related attitudes are ingrained in human psychology, producing a universal framework for thought and behavior. Another anthropologist, Sidney Mintz, in his 1985 book, *Sweetness and Power*, documented how sugar changed dietary practices historically and culturally.

The historical, cultural, biological, behavioral, and socioeconomic factors and effects of food production and consumption were first studied by scholars in the late twentieth century. Boston University launched a new gastronomy course in 1990 that concentrated on the cultural and culinary facets of food intake. New York University founded the Department of Nutrition and Food Studies in a similar vein, providing students and academics with a venue to research how people, societies, and communities connect to food in a historical and cultural context. As a result, food became a topic of study across many disciplines. Culinary historians research recipes and culinary methods, looking at the production, preparation, and use of foodstuffs. Food historians study how food has affected historical events all around the world. Psychologists study eating disorders in people from all cultures while focusing on how people choose their food. They also study the consumption of food and how it affects people. Sociologists examine food and its consumption through topics like hunger, malnutrition, and supply-side disparities. In literature, too, we find how novels, poems, travel writing and memoir frequently make use of food imagery. With new schools opening up food-related departments and offering courses in food culture and food history, the field of food studies is steadily growing, emphasizing how food is becoming more and more accepted as a field of study across cultural boundaries.

Emergence of culinary mysteries

Since the beginning of the genre, food has occasionally appeared in crime stories written by authors like Edgar Allan Poe and Sherlock Holmes. However, in recent years, culinary mysteries have become more popular as food has increasingly influenced more literary genres and spheres of life than ever before, where eating and drinking have significant social and cultural implications. The genre of culinary mysteries originally appeared in the 1980s and 1990s, when "real recipes" were included into the main plot and where the detectives not only solved the mysteries but also cooked delicacies and baked goods, such as grilling sherry-flavored tuna or baking chocolate comfort cookies. The food editor of Sunset Magazine, Virginia Rich, is generally credited with creating the genre. She is known for penning three mysteries with the cook and amateur sleuth Eugenia Porter. In the 2009 book *A Critical Study of Female Culinary Detective Stories: Murder by Cookbook*, Nieves Pascual Soler examines how cooking and eating are related to the act of detection and how they contribute to define the identity of the detective-cook in modern culinary mysteries. Food plays a crucial role in a mystery novel, frequently lending authenticity to the detective story and showing readers the world as it is, where people eat and drink much like readers do in real life. It also features as a symbol of safety and security amidst the murderer's attempt to distort the order of society. Food can also feature in crime fiction as a narrative tool, as a measure to forward the plot, serving as a clue, a murder weapon or even as a technique in the investigation.

Detective fiction has historically been a genre dominated by men, calling for a male protagonist to solve the crime and bring about social order. However, the newly growing Golden Age sub-genre of the crime novel, which produced many female authors, also saw an increase in female readers among its audience in the twentieth century. The detective fiction genre was subsequently feminized by the genre's female creators like Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers. The Golden Age novels, which were written in the style of clue puzzles, challenging

the reader to solve the mystery alongside the detective character, included a number of references to food and the domestic space. Agatha Christie wrote her detective novels at a time when there were intense gender negotiations going on, with women accepting new roles at home, as well as outside contributing to the economy of the war-torn country. She attempted to feminize the essentially male-dominated genre by feminizing not just her detective personalities but also by depicting and making references to food, which is closely associated with feminity and domesticity. Her first detective character Hercule Poirot disproved the stereotypes of masculinity of the traditional English detective. Poirot, is portrayed as a fussy and plump former Belgian police officer, who represents knowledge that is distinctly feminine rather than the male-centric knowledge of earlier detective prototypes like Poe's Dupin or Doyle's Sherlock Holmes. Christie's second detective figure, Miss Marple is an elderly spinster who used gossip and skill demonstration as a rhetorical device to solve local cases.

In her detective works, Christie does not merely depict food, but uses it as a narrative tool to forward her plot structure, making attempts to write about the English way of life, their food, eating habits, rituals and culture, which were turning tumultuous after the carnage of the destructive wars. Through her novels, Christie depicts how breakfast and tea rituals are synonymous with the lives of the English people. She emphasizes the value of upholding good English culinary customs and traditions. In her short story "A Christmas Adventure" (1999), Christie emphasizes the value of maintaining customs surrounding the intake of food throughout the Christmas season. Christmas celebrations in the past have been family-focused occasions where people have loved baking and eating holiday treats together. With the onset of modernization, however, the family-centered holiday was pushed aside as families opted to eat out instead of continuing the ritualistic family tradition. In "A Christmas Adventure," Mrs. Lacey notes to Poirot, who is their guest for Christmas, how the Lacey family prides itself in

the value of keeping up the traditional Christmas celebration, “All the same old things, the Christmas tree and the stockings hung up and the oyster soup and the turkey – two turkeys, one boiled and one roast – and the plum pudding with the ring and the bachelor’s button and all the rest of it in it. We can’t have sixpences nowadays because they’re not pure silver any more. But all the old desserts, the Elvas plums and Carlsbad plums and almonds and raisins, and crystallized fruit and ginger. Dear me, I sound like a catalogue from Fortnum and Mason!” (Christie 14).

Likewise, in the novel *At Bertram's Hotel* (1965), the hotel preserves the elegance of the Edwardian era. The hotel staff upholds the custom and makes use of nostalgia for bygone times as a cover for the ongoing crime syndicate that they run. They employ food to reinforce a quintessential British image to the visitors, such as traditional "seed cake" and buttery "English muffins":

> There were also American visitors fascinated by seeing the titled English really getting down to their traditional afternoon tea. For afternoon tea was quite a feature of Bertram’s.
>
> It was nothing less than splendid. Presiding over the ritual was Henry, a large and magnificent figure, a ripe fifty, avuncular, sympathetic, and with the courtly manners of that long vanished species: the perfect butler. Slim youths performed the actual work under Henry’s austere direction. There were large crested silver trays, and Georgian silver teapots. The china, if not actually Rockingham and Davenport, looked like it. The Blind Earl services were particular favourites. The tea was the best Indian, Ceylon, Darjeeling, Lapsang, etc. As for eatables, you could ask for anything you liked—and get it!” (Christie 8)

Miss Marple, who occupies the hotel for a fortnight, even dazzles and beams over the sumptuous meal that she is served, which appeals to her traditional appetite:

> Five minutes later breakfast came. A comfortable tray with a big potbellied teapot, creamy-looking milk, a silver hot water jug. Two beautifully poached eggs on toast, poached the proper way, not little round hard bullets shaped in tin cups, a good-sized round of butter stamped with a thistle. Marmalade, honey and strawberry jam. Delicious-looking rolls, not the hard kind with papery interiors—they smelt of fresh bread (the most delicious smell in the world!). There was also an apple, a pear and a banana.

> Miss Marple inserted a knife gingerly but with confidence. She was not disappointed. Rich deep yellow yolk oozed out, thick and creamy. Proper eggs! (Christie 40)

Many critics accuse Christie of continuing to maintain her distance from the contemporary socio-political challenges pertaining to the consequences of the War. Alison Light notes that Christie deals with troubles pertaining to the domestic sphere, where her detectives seek out family secrets that frequently involve the issue of inheritance. Her novels center on domesticity, where the stories are set in the home to create plots, a method which helps Christie in further feminising the genre because the home is typically a feminine realm. In Christie's novels, food serves a variety of functions. First and foremost, eating is seen as a calming ritual. For instance, in *Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), she paints a picture of a happy couple gathered around the dining room table, depicting a cozy scene of the Vicar's family. However, Christie also uses food rituals to frequently disorient the established order, as we see how, in fact, hostile and violent scenes regularly take place in the kitchen and dining room in Christie's books, where the crime scenes are frequently located at the time of breakfast, lunch, teatime, or dinner. For instance, in *A Pocketful of Rye* (1953), the family afternoon tea ritual becomes a crime scene when Mrs. Adele Fortescue is murdered after the killer infuses her tea and scones with cyanide.

In Christie's novels, food also offers a clue to the mystery. For instance, the characters' eating and drinking habits contribute crucial information to the investigation's conclusion. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Poirot investigates the reason of Mrs. Inglethorp's death, who was thought to have died in a closed room in the middle of the night, by carefully examining china and cutlery, which include the remains of liquids like coffee and hot cocoa, “A fresh access of pain seized the unfortunate old lady. The convulsions were of a violence terrible to behold. Everything was confusion. We thronged round her, powerless to help or alleviate. A final convulsion lifted her from the bed, until she appeared to rest upon her head and her heels, with her body arched in an extraordinary manner. In vain Mary and John tried

to administer more brandy. The moments flew. Again the body arched itself in that peculiar fashion" (Christie 40).

"Delicious death!" : Use of foul toxins in Christie's novels

Alexander Walker observes, how in addition to functioning as a literary device, food in a detective story can serve as a symbol that can also gain a more sinister undertone. Glenn Collins observes how in Christie's novels, food has been one of the easiest ways to kill someone. Food is frequently utilized as a murder weapon in Christie's books, disrupting the established order, proving the notion that something is wrong within that established order. In almost all of her detective novels, poison is induced through a drink, such as tea, wine or coffee, or in food items such as scones, marmalade, and pie, so much so that food and food rituals become bad omen. Kathryn Harkup, in her book, *A for Arsenic: The Poisons of Agatha Christie* (2015), writes that Christie used poison in the majority of her books, far more frequently than any of her contemporaries. Harkup traces Christie's interest and knowledge in poison to her job as a volunteer in a local dispensary during the First World War. The use of poison to dispose of a character became one of her favorite methods, and she used various poisons ranging from cyanide, taxine, strychnine. In the novel, *A Murder is Announced* (1950), the character Patrick, refers to a decadent chocolate cake as delicious death cake, a rich chocolate cake, made with very much butter, sugar and raisins:

> "Death!" said Patrick in sepulchral tones. "Delicious death."
> "Be quiet, Patrick," said Miss Blacklock as Miss Bunner gave a little yelp.
> "I only meant the special cake that Mitzi makes," said Patrick apologetically. "You know we always call it delicious death. (Christie 21)

Later the cake ends up serving as the last meal of Miss Dora Bunner, the elderly friend of Miss Blacklock. Mitzi the cook made the cake in honour of Miss Bunner's birthday, who later died after eating it, "Yes, found dead in her bed this morning. Died in her sleep, doctor says. He

doesn't think it was natural though her health was in a bad state. Narcotic poisoning, that's his guess. Autopsy's fixed for tonight" (Christie 167).

In her first book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), Christie discussed the use of food as a murder weapon. In the initial pages of the novel, we learn that Mrs. Inglethorpe, a wealthy elderly widow who had recently remarried a mysterious man Alfred Inglethorpe, twenty years younger than her, an act that was despised by the members of her family. However, one day she was suddenly taken in by a seizure in bed at night and died, seemingly shouting her husband's name. The results of the autopsy revealed that she had been poisoned with strychnine. She was known to take a daily dose of a strychnine tonic as a nerve stimulant. Her death raises questions of strychnine tonic overdose. The cause of her death was investigated, but an overdose of her tonic was ruled out. In order to properly investigate the murder, detective Poirot, who just so happened to be nearby, examined Mrs. Inglethorpe's prior meals and the cups and saucers that held her coffee and cocoa:

> 'Well, what time was the coffee served?'
> 'About eight o'clock.'
> 'Therefore she drank it between then and half past eight—certainly not much later. Well, strychnine is a fairly rapid poison. Its effects would be felt very soon, probably in about an hour. Yet, in Mrs. Inglethorp's case, the symptoms do not manifest themselves until five o'clock the next morning: nine hours! But a heavy meal, taken at about the same time as the poison, might retard its effects, though hardly to that extent. Still, it is a possibility to be taken into account. But, according to you, she ate very little for supper, and yet the symptoms do not develop until early the next morning! Now that is a curious circumstance, my friend. Something may arise at the autopsy to explain it. In the meantime, remember it.' (Christie 42)

Beginning in the early twentieth century, eating out came to be for special occasions. In the book, *Sparkling Cyanide* (1945), the popular upper-class restaurant, the Luxembourg Hotel, is used as a stage not once, but twice; first, as the setting for a murder by poisoning, and then, a year later, for a reenactment of the infamous supper. Food is laced with poison to cause two murders. Poison is induced into food to murder Rosemary Barton during her birthday party

at the Luxembourg Hotel, in the presence of seven people, one of whom was eventually found to be the murderer; and every one of them apparently had a motive to kill the victim :

> 'I was dazed when it happened – completely bowled over. I just accepted the verdict at the inquest. My wife had had 'flu, was run down. No suspicion of anything but suicide arose. The stuff was in her handbag, you see.'
> 'What was the stuff ?'
> 'Cyanide.'
> 'I remember. She took it in champagne.'
> 'Yes. It seemed, at the time, all quite straight-forward. (Christie 142)

It was earlier ascertained at the inquest that Rosemary had committed suicide because of depression, but things take on a more complicated turn when George Barton, Rosemary's husband, received an anonymous letter claiming that Rosemary's death was not a suicide as it was ascertained at her inquest, but actually murder. George, troubled by the letters decides to investigate. He realizes that whoever killed Rosemary, must be one of the seven people who attended her birthday party. In order to unmask the murderer, George decides to throw another party to celebrate the eighteenth birthday of Iris Marle, Rosemary's sister, but things take an unexpected turn when George himself is killed at the party, the same way Rosemary met her end, through cyanide poisoning administered through drinks, "George Barton died of cyanide poisoning – same thing as his wife a year ago" (Christie 181).

The book also draws attention to the way in which women in Christie's novels utilize poison against males, using the toxins as a way of acting out against powerful males. In *Sparkling Cyanide*, it is later revealed that Mr. Barton's secretary is the murderess who poisoned both Mr. and Mrs. Barton with potassium cyanide in order to get him to marry her by killing Rosemary. However, when Mr. Barton gets suspicious about who the real murderer may be and plans to reveal it at the party he throws in honour of Iris, the secretary fears being exposed and decides to kill Mr. Barton in the same way she killed his wife, through the administration of cyanide in his drink. Again, in *The Crooked House* (1949), the wealthy patriarch Aristide Leonides has been murdered. The fact that he has numerous successors to

his substantial money generates police suspicion, but Josephine, his youngest grandchild, gets blamed because she switched Leonides' insulin shot for eserine, which ultimately kills the elderly man, but it turns out that Brenda, Leonides' second wife, was the one who gave the wealthy patriarch the lethal dose using a syringe laced with eserine because she intended to inherit his enormous riches by killing him. Likewise in the novel, *Five Little Pigs* (1942), Elsa Greer murders the painter Amyas Crale, for whom she models, because she wanted to marry him. He also makes a commitment to marry her, but Elsa overhears him telling his wife Caroline that he wouldn't leave her, and Elsa learns that Amyas had only made the pledge in order to use her as the subject of his latest painting. So, she laces the glass with coniine to extract her revenge before Caroline pours his beer into the glass, and is wrongfully sentenced for Amyas death.

In *Sparkling Cyanide*, food and consumption rituals later help solve the mystery surrounding George Barton's death, which is finally solved by Anthony Browne at the end of the book thanks to a cunning notion that occurs to him while studying a table set for tea and coffee and the places that different eaters occupy around it, while having tea with Colonel Race and Officer Kemp of Scotland Yard. He explains:

> To illustrate this, I tried an experiment. Race was drinking tea without sugar, Kemp was drinking tea with sugar, and I was drinking coffee. In appearance the three fluids were of much the same colour. We were sitting round a small marble-topped table among several other round marble-topped tables. On the pre-text of an urgent brainwave I urged the other two out of their seats and out into the vestibule, pushing the chairs aside as we went, and also managing to move Kemp's pipe which was lying by his plate to a similar position by my plate but without letting him see me do it. As soon as we were outside I made an excuse and we returned, Kemp slightly ahead. He pulled the chair to the table and sat down opposite the plate that was marked by the pipe he had left behind him. Race sat on his right as before and I on his left – but mark what had happened – a new A. and B. contradiction! A. Kemp's cup has sugared tea in it. B. Kemp's cup has coffee in it. Two conflicting statements that cannot both be true – But they are both true. The misleading term is Kemp's cup. Kemp's cup when he left the table and Kemp's cup when he returned to the table are not the same. (Christie 328-329)

Again, in the novel, *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953), a crazy murderer bases a string of killings on the individual lyrics of a food-themed nursery rhyme. When the novel opens, the inability of Miss. Somers to properly prepare a cup of tea foreshadow the death that will take place in the novel, only a few moments later. Mr. Fortescue falls ill while sipping tea in his office, accusing his secretary Miss. Grosvenor, "Words came out in jerky gasps. "Tea—what the hell—you put in the tea—get help—quick get a doctor—" (Christie 7). He is brought to the hospital, where he is pronounced dead and it is determined that taxine poisoning was the cause of death. It has been found that the taxine given to Mr. Fortescue was not administered through his coffee but rather through his breakfast, which must have been ingested two to three hours earlier. As a result, the police go into the home and ask about the breakfast that was served:

> I've got what I could, sir." So Sergeant Hay reported. "The marmalade, bit of the ham. Samples of tea, coffee and sugar, for what they're worth. Actual brews have been thrown out by now, of course, but there's one point. There was a good lot of coffee left over and they had it in the servants' hall at elevenses—that's important, I should say. (Christie 46)

In the novels, negligence and inaccuracy in performing activities related to food preparation might also result in death. In addition to Miss Somers' inability, the novel once again highlights the carelessness of the maid Gladys, who forgets to cut sandwiches that were meant to be served for tea. The scene foreshadows two murders, the first of which is that of Mrs. Adele Fortescue, the lady of the house, and the second of which is that of Gladys herself, who was strangled to death. The inquiry into Mr. Fortescue's murder appears to have unnerved the unidentified assailant, who attempts to kill Mrs. Adele Fortescue, Mr. Fortescue's younger second wife. However, this time the murderer uses cyanide poisoning to kill the victim, injecting it into her afternoon tea, scones, and honey, "Mrs. Fortescue had tea with the family in the library. The last person to leave the room and the tea table was Miss Elaine Fortescue, her stepdaughter. She states that as she left the room Mrs. Fortescue was pouring herself out another cup of tea. Some twenty minutes or half hour later Miss Dove, who acts as housekeeper, went in to remove

the tea tray. Mrs. Fortescue was still sitting on the sofa, dead. Beside her was a tea cup a quarter full and in the dregs of it was potassium cyanide" (Christie 88). Further investigation reveals a jar of marmalade that was abandoned among the yew tree hedges, which seem to establish the fact that someone had tampered with the marmalade, not with the coffee that Mr. Fortescue drank:

> After a slight gap the moving picture went on in his mind. It was the breakfast table now. Rex Fortescue stretching out his hand for the marmalade pot, taking out a spoonful of marmalade and spreading it on his toast and butter. Easier, far easier that way than the risk and difficulty of insinuating it into his coffee cup. A foolproof method of administering the poison! And afterwards? Another gap and a picture that was not quite so clear. The replacing of that pot of marmalade by another with exactly the same amount taken from it. And then an open window. A hand and an arm flinging out that pot into the shrubbery. Whose hand and arm? (Christie 94).

Similar to *A Pocketful of Rye*, the killer in *And Then There Were None* (1939) uses a nursery rhyme about ten little soldier boys to get rid of the people. The strangers were invited to stay on the island for a few days, but once they arrived, they were accused of a number of murders by an unidentified voice. As a result, they were all killed one by one. Food features prominently in the novel, as Christie initially describes how the strangers are served coffee and a sumptuous dinner upon their arrival on the island:

> Rogers went round with the coffee tray. The coffee was good—really black and very hot.
> The whole party had dined well. They were satisfied with themselves and with life. The hands of the clock pointed to twenty minutes past nine. There was a silence—a comfortable replete silence. (Christie 36)

However, things take on a dark turn when people are killed one by one. Anthony Marston is the first to get killed through cyanide poisoning administered through his whiskey as the killer later reveals through a manuscript, "Potassium cyanide is easily obtained by householders for putting down wasps. I had some in my possession and it was easy to slip it into Marston's almost empty glass during the tense period after the gramophone recital" (Christie 191).

Then the killer proceeds to kills Mrs. Rogers, Colonel Macarthur and Mr. Rogers, in accordance to the severity of their crimes. The killer then proceeds to murder Miss Brent, the upright puritan whose crime was to cast out her housemaid Beatrice Taylor, who was pregnant out of wedlock. Miss Brent was killed with the help of food served to her "At breakfast I slipped my last dose of chloral into Miss Brent's coffee when I was refilling her cup. We left her in the dining room. I slipped in there a little while later—she was nearly unconscious and it was easy to inject a strong solution of cyanide into her. The bumble bee business was really rather childish—but somehow, you know, it pleased me. I liked adhering as closely as possible to my nursery rhyme" (Christie 197).

This dissociation of food from crime is consciously maintained by the characters, who refuse even to speak of murder and crime during mealtimes. For example in *And Then There Were None*, the deaths of Anthony Marston and Mrs. Rogers does not deter the group from consuming a hearty breakfast at the behest of Rogers, who does not mourn but instead continues to carry out his food preparation duties:

> They went into breakfast. There was a vast dish of eggs and bacon on the sideboard and tea and coffee.
> Rogers held the door open for them to pass in, then shut it from the outside.
> Emily Brent said:
> "That man looks ill this morning."
> Dr. Armstrong, who was standing by the window, cleared his throat. He said:
> "You must excuse any—er—shortcomings this morning. Rogers has had to do the best he can for breakfast single-handed. Mrs. Rogers has—er—not been able to carry on this morning. (Christie 66)

As the story goes on, the promise of a well-stocked pantry is unable to allay the survivors' dread for their lives or to bring about a return to normalcy. Mealtimes are no longer considered a calm ritual when the guests die one by one. Instead of eating at the table together, they prefer to stand around it because they are afraid of losing sight of one another even for a brief period of time. Later, when there are only three remaining guest— Vera Claythorne, Mr. William

Blore and Phillip Lombard — they decide to stay outside of the house because they are too terrified to eat anything. However, when Mr. Blore tries to enter the house to appease his appetite, he is killed by having his head crushed by a large piece of marble, revealing how the consumption of food is a central element that brings about the deaths of the characters.

Once more, there are incidents of food poisoning in *Three Act Tragedy* (1934). In the book, Sir Charles Cartwright, an actor, orchestrates a play in order to win the heart of Hermione (Egg) Gore-Lytton. He also goes to great lengths to keep the identity of his first marriage a secret, even going so far as to poison Sir Bartholomew Strange, a physician who was a childhood friend of his, with nicotine. In the same way, the unwitting Mr. Babbington, who attends the party hosted by Sir Charles Cartwright, accepts a cocktail despite the fact that he is not accustomed to drinking alcohol and fails to notice the bitterness brought on by the presence of an alien substance in the glass. He then drinks the liquid and dies as a result of poisoning. His poisoning was really a rehearsal for Sir Bartholomew Strange's eventual murder, carried out by Cartwright. Cartwright even succeeds in killing an unidentified victim by sending her poisoned chocolates.

In *4.50 From Paddington* (1957), Christie revisits the issue of food poisoning due to arsenic in the novel. The story revolves around Mrs. McGillicuddy, a friend of Miss Marple, who witnesses a man strangling a woman on a moving train, and relates it to Miss Marple, who seeks the help of Lucy Eyelesbarrow, a skilled cook and well-known housekeeper, asking her to take employment in Rutherford Hall, where Miss Marple believes the body of the woman to be hidden. Miss Marple tasks Lucy with the job of finding the body of the murdered woman, which Marple believes must be hidden in the vicinity of Rutherford Hall. Lucy undertakes her search of the property under the pretense of playing golf. She finds a woman's coat's fur stuck on a shrub. She next discovers an inexpensive compact. Lucy brings these to Miss Marple, who

thinks the murderer had removed the body from the embankment where it had fallen away from the railway, driven a car outside the grounds at night, and hidden the body. Miss Marple believes the murderer knew everything about Rutherford Hall, and Lucy finally discovers the body within a Greco-Roman sarcophagus at Rutherford Hall. Here, Lucy is portrayed as an inquisitive domestic worker who snoops around until she finds the woman's body in the sarcophagus in the barn. The murderer is found out to be the family doctor, Dr. Quimper, who poisoned Alfred Crackenthorpe by administrating arsenic through the cocktail, and later kills the son, Harold. Harold receives a supply of tablets from Dr. Quimper a few days after arriving back in London from Rutherford Hall, despite the fact that the doctor had previously advised him not to take any more. When Harold swallows them, they are poisoned with aconitine, and he dies. Later, Miss Marple and Mrs. McGillicuddy are invited to Rutherford Hall for an afternoon tea visit by Lucy. As soon as they arrive, Mrs. McGillicuddy is told by Miss Marple to request to use the restroom. Miss Marple starts to choke on a fish bone while eating a sandwich with fish paste. Dr. Quimper makes an effort to help her. At that precise moment, Mrs. McGillicuddy walks into the room and sees the doctor's hands on Miss Marple's throat and recognizes him as the murderer.

Throughout Christie's novels, we see murderers frequently use kitchen appliances to carry out their crimes, such as the kitchen knife as a weapon. *A Caribbean Mystery* (1964) assumes a sinister aspect when one of the servant girls is discovered in the garden with a kitchen knife buried into her:

> Tim was coming slowly up the steps. His face was ghastly. Evelyn looked up at him, raising her eyebrows in a query.
> "It's one of our girls," he said. "What's-her-name—Victoria. Somebody's put a knife in her." (Christie 94-95)

Again, in *A Murder Is Announced* (1950), the kitchen is used as a crime scene when the criminal Letitia attempts to kill her maid Mitzi by drowning her in a sink full of dishwater:

> Mitzi turned off the taps and as she did so two hands came up behind her head and with one swift movement forced it down into the water-filled sink.
> "Only I know that you're telling the truth for once," said Miss Blacklock viciously.
> Mitzi thrashed and struggled but Miss Blacklock was strong and her hands held the girl's head firmly under water" (Christie 226).

The kitchen setting appears frequently in Christie's books as a way to evoke memories of the past. Food allusions are used to evoke recollections of the characters' childhoods and to depict an idealised picture of a traditional way of English life. References to food spaces, such as posh dining rooms, tearooms, and hotels, which she uses to evoke the traditional stereotypical image of Englishness, serve the same purpose. However, she occasionally also uses these settings as a backdrop to the majority of her stories, advancing her plot by introducing a sense of danger and crime that threatens the peace of traditional English society.

Conclusion

Agatha Christie used the genre of detective fiction to mock and unsettle the established notions of English masculine bravado, transgressing the established norms to feminize the genre, and the depiction of English domestic space helped her achieve the goal to create a new feminine space where food plays a significant part. Her books reflect traditional English domesticity, as well as eating customs and rituals, which are an essential component of her works. She utilises food to evoke memories of traditional English culture and its dietary customs. She frequently refers to food and consumption rituals in her works, where food is frequently associated with safety and the absence of crime; it serves as a symbol of peace and order that will be upended by crime. Food and eating are seen as calming rituals. Food also serves as a clue to the mystery in her novels and at times it also serves as a tool for forwarding the narrative structure, as in many of Christie's novels, the criminals choose the use of poisoned food or drink as a murder weapon, typically to inject toxins into the victim in order to put them to death. She uses food to illustrate how the established order can be upended by the violence of crime, which tends to upset the peace and safety. In fact, hostile and violent scenes regularly take place in the kitchen

and dining room in Christie's books. Frequently, the crime scene is located where breakfast, lunch, tea time, or dinner is being served, thereby giving readers the notion that the cosy environment of the domestic space, might be more problematic than it appears.

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