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A STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF *CARDS ON THE TABLE* BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

São Leopoldo
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‘Oh, my dear friend, it is impossible *not* to give oneself away – unless one never opens one’s mouth! Speech is the deadliest of revealers’ (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 19, author emphasis added).

ABSTRACT

Detective stories captivate readers' attention as they face dazzling surprises in the reading journey. This characteristic comes from the structure of the narrative and elements regarding the fair play of the game the story proposes as Todorov (1977) discusses. The aim of this study was to conduct an analysis of the narrative structure and the fair play in *Cards on the Table* (2016) by Agatha Christie through a review of literature about the topics. The research presented here identifies the story analysed as a masterpiece created by Christie. This structure differs from the common narrative structure of detective fiction the author is known for because the story is a narrative experiment that breaks not only its pre-elaborated structure, but also the rules of fair play. This study also encourages other approaches which can contribute to the understanding of the techniques applied by Hercule Poirot to solve the crime.

Keywords: literature; detective fiction; Hercule Poirot; structural analysis; fair play.

RESUMO

As histórias de detetive capturam a atenção dos leitores quando eles encaram uma jornada de leitura com surpresas exuberantes. Essa característica parte da estrutura da narrativa e de elementos relativos ao jogo limpo que a história propõe, conforme discute Todorov (1977). Este trabalho tem como objetivo analisar a estrutura narrativa e o jogo limpo do livro *Cards on the Table* de Agatha Christie a partir de uma revisão de literatura sobre os tópicos. A pesquisa aqui apresentada identifica a história analisada como uma obra-prima criada por Christie. Esta estrutura difere da estrutura narrativa de ficção de detetive pela qual a autora é conhecida, pois a história é um experimento narrativo que quebra não apenas a estrutura pré-estabelecida, mas as regras do jogo limpo. Este estudo também incentiva outras abordagens que possam contribuir para a compreensão das técnicas aplicadas por Hercule Poirot para a resolução do crime.

Palavras-chave: literatura; ficção de detetive; Hercule Poirot; análise estrutural; jogo limpo.

FIGURES

SUMMARY

1 INTRODUCTION

Detective stories have been conquering fans since their creation in the nineteenth century. They captivate readers' attention and curiosity throughout a journey of discovering the clues to solve the crime together with the detective. In fact, the detective, who is the one responsible for interrogating the suspects, guides our reading through his precise analysis of clues. As people get deep into reading this kind of fiction, they start perceiving characteristics which are responsible for keeping the readers interested.

For the author of the final thesis, trying to solve crimes is particularly meaningful because detective stories were the reason English became part of her life. In fact, it all began when the author first watched an episode of a TV show named *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* in its original format. Later, at University, English and detective stories became entangled throughout her academic life. Her love for this kind of stories made her eager to understand the structure of their narratives better and this led her to choose one of her favourite authors, Agatha Christie, as the object of her research.

When it comes to the structural analysis of a narrative, Todorov (1969, p. 71) states that one of the aims of this approach is "[…] to present a spectrum of literary possibilities, in such a manner that the existing works of literature appear as particular instances that have been realized". That is, by analysing the narrative structure of a book we can demonstrate a one-of-a-kind book and what makes it different from all others. In detective fiction, the order of the events narrated and the secluded space in which the characters inhabit are only two out of other important structural features to the accomplishment of these narrative games: to find the *whodunnit*. Additionally, the idea of fair play in these stories is an important aspect to be approached, as it is what creates the fairness of the evidence in the relationship between reader and detective and is part of the structure that every author must follow (TODOROV, 1977).

One of the authors who presented an outstanding work was Agatha Christie, when in one of Poirot's investigations narrated in the book *Cards on the Table*, the methods used are different from the ones used in his previous cases, as stated in the book's preface. Even though a recapitulation strategy and other details to unravel the crime are presented, the narrator states that the book is a narrative experiment where the only means of discovering the one who committed the crime is psychological. This

brings into light the rules of fair play every detective fiction should comply with and the narrative structure of detective fiction.

This research analyses the narrative structure of *Cards on the Table* (2016) and Agatha Christie's fair play in it to examine if the narrative complies with two out of the eight points of the rules of fair play, summarized by Todorov (1977). If it does not follow, what are the deviations from Todorov's points and the author's position regarding it. Concerning the methodology, this paper uses a review of literature about detective fiction and structural analysis of narrative to conduct the study of the book.

The final thesis that follows is organized in five chapters, including the introduction here presented. The second chapter is divided into three subsections in which the theoretical background of detective fiction and its narrative structure are addressed, based on authors such as Todorov (1977), Knight (1980, 2003, 2004), Scaggs (2005), and Bridgeman (2007). The third chapter has six subsections focusing on a brief description of *Cards on the Table* (2016), going through the characters, the bridge game, the story of the crime and the story of the investigation. The fourth chapter is dedicated to the structural analysis of the book, having four structural elements and Christie's fair play being analysed. The fifth chapter addresses the conclusions of the study and commends new studies of Agatha Christie's book.

2 WHERE THERE IS A CORPSE, THERE IS A STORY

For many years murder has been one of the most intriguing crimes in the literary world as its eccentricity has extended the number of readers. Through different manners, murder has been executed, described, investigated, solved, and even judged by characters in distinct narratives of this kind of fiction. Referred commonly as “crime fiction” by many authors (KNIGHT, 2003, 2004; SCAGGS, 2005), despite “[…] its generic (and sub-generic) flexibility and porosity” (SCAGGS, 2005, [ch. 1]), there is “[…] a global estimate that a third of the fiction published in English belongs to the genre” (KNIGHT, 2004, [p. 10]).

“Crime fiction” is dated to have been created during the eighteenth century (KNIGHT, 2004; BELL, 2003), even though some authors identified aspects of it in books written B.C. (SAYERS, 1992 *apud* SCAGGS, 2005). This genre has evolved as writers started bringing their own essence into their works, leading to the recognition of sub-genres such as the detective fiction and the thriller fiction. Many critics have tried to define some characteristics for each sub-genre and classify works under them, but as Scaggs (2005) mentions in the introduction of *Crime Fiction,* the employment of “crime fiction” as a label for an unclassifiable genre is also an issue to be addressed.

Tzvetan Todorov (1977, p. 42) in his remarkable discussion in *The Typology of Detective Fiction* argues that “we write either about literature in general or about a single work, and it is a tacit convention that to classify several works in a genre is to devalue them”. In other words, to label works with similar and different characteristics under a sole designation is to depreciate them. He also mentions that “[…] a work was judged poor if it did not sufficiently obey the rules of its genre” during the classical period, which could lead to a non-recommendation of the work because it did not fit into a specific genre (TODOROV, 1977, p. 42).

As Todorov looks into the study of genres onwards, he implies the possibility of using typology to compare measurable elements the theory of genres did not explore. He claims that this contradiction between work and genre does not only exist in popular literature with an exception for masterpieces. To exemplify his point of view he discusses the “kinds” of detective fiction, his theoretical approach, in order to demonstrate the delimitation of it and how minor features, mostly overlooked, can be labelled under these different types (TODOROV, 1977).

Many critics of crime fiction and its derived genres, such as mystery and detective fiction, have given their perspectives on the topic by discussing the way these fictions are classified and even creating terms to identify new branches of the same root, in this case, crime fiction. There are two authors who are worth mentioning as they have come with different perspectives of these already named types of fiction: Carl D. Malmgren and Stephen Knight.

Malmgren (1997), in his article *Anatomy of Murder: Mystery, Detective, and Crime Fiction*, has argued about the difference between mystery, detective, and crime fiction. According to the idea of the Self and the World signs, the difference is motivation and ground respectively. As his arguments are complex and require an in-depth understanding of Saussure's relation between signifiers and signifieds, the better way to explain his thoughts on each type of fiction is by describing some characteristics he defined as belonging to them specifically.

As to mystery fiction, it happens in a centred world, where there is order, stability. It is also free of uncertainties and has motivation as its basic principle (MALMGREN, 1997). Detection in this kind of narrative is what leads the amateur investigator through the journey of two stories – as Todorov (1977, p. 44) states, "[…] the story of the crime and the story of the investigation […]" – to answer three questions in order to discover the Truth, the Technique, and the Theory: *who, how, and why?* (MALMGREN, 1997). As a result of answering to these questions in the last chapters of the book, the investigator re-establishes the order disarranged by the committed murder.

Different from the mystery, detective fiction occurs in a decentred world presented with aspects of the "real" world. Another aspect which differentiates mystery from detective fiction Malmgren approaches is the role of murder. For detective fiction, Malmgren (1997, p. 124) says that "[…] murder is more often incidental, the product of contingent events precipitated by the investigation of a case, and frequently *ad hoc*, committed with the means at hand", unlike the mystery fiction in which the murder is planned, and it is one of the reasons why the book came to be written (TODOROV, 1977). For this kind of fiction, Truth, Justice, and Resolution are the main signs which conduct the narrative; Truth being the only thing not entirely uncovered even though the culprit is caught (MALMGREN, 1997).

Crime fiction in Malmgren's (1997) analysis is the fiction from the perspective of the criminal who is the central character of the story whose integrity and honesty are

questioned. Henceforth, the ground is changed from *who* to *why* to explore the protagonist's mind psychologically and understand his behaviour for committing the crime narrated in the story. As the reader follows the criminal's journey to know how or if he is going to be caught and judged by society, what prevails in this kind of fiction is the pursuit of Justice rather than the Truth (MALMGREN, 1997).

Conversely, Knight (2004, [p. 12]) says Malmgren's analysis is somewhat confusing as "[…] mysteries, detectives and crimes interweave among the sub-genres […]". To him the descriptive term "crime fiction" refers to the whole genre while the terms "clue-puzzle" and "private-eye" concern the Christie approach – Agatha Christie's style of writing – and the American variation respectively as they "[…] depend on centrally structural, even technical, features of the texts which do not overlap like Malmgren's categories" (KNIGHT, 2004, [p. 12]).

Hence, these different approaches presented concerning the genre and its classifications are reliable sources to understand the way these fictions characterized by mysteries, crimes, and detectives were developed in the following centuries. In relation to the expansion of the genre, the next section approaches the detective fiction responsible for spreading the genre worldwide.

2.1 The Detective Appears

As seen in the prior section, there are different ways critics refer to and classify aspects concerning crime, mystery, and detective stories which are important to understand the unstableness of the genre. To facilitate the comprehension throughout the theoretical development, from this point on, "crime fiction" will be used to refer to the whole genre, while "detective fiction" and "clue-puzzle" will be used to refer to detective stories in which the detective is present, following predominantly Knight's (2004) approach. If one of these terms is used with a different meaning, the author's approach is referred to.

It was during the eighteenth century, specifically in 1773, when *The Newgate Calendar* – the first large collection of crime stories – was published. This was the starting point in which plots around murder began to be written. Deriving from these stories, a figure well known by many readers of crime fiction became present in the following century, leading to the creation of a sub-genre named after the fictional character created: the detective fiction (KNIGHT, 2004; PRIESTMAN, 1991).

As stated by Knight (1980) in his discussion on *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction*, the image of the detective, mostly an amateur or private investigator, changed as the centuries went by. This change did not occur only because the figure of the detective suffered alterations in its characteristics, but as the structure has also been modified, it allowed the genre to expand as writers begun remodelling the detective form towards a different audience, as Agatha Christie did. The main three authors responsible for creating detectives with distinct characteristics that led to this transformation of the private investigator character were Edgar Allan Poe, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, and Agatha Christie.

Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin was created by Edgar Allan Poe in the middle of the nineteenth century. He appeared for the first time in *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*, which "[…] is often identified as the first detective story […]" and followed by two more stories setting a "[…] template for the crime fiction of the next century" (SCAGGS, 2005, ch. 1). Dupin became a character known for his intellectuality and "[…] 'a peculiar analytic ability' […]" which helped him in solving mysteries (KNIGHT, 1980, p. 40). The basis of his detection while investigating was the "[…] assessment to physical data" which helped him in constructing theories to find the truth about the crime inquired (KNIGHT, 1980, p. 42). Although being the first recognized detective present in crime fiction, Poe's short stories did not provide enough room for the development of the character as Doyle did.

Sir Arthur Conan Doyle extended the figure of the detective when he created Sherlock Holmes by captivating readers with science and rational enquiry approaches. Holmes, as Knight (1980, p. 67) says, "[…] is a synonym for a detective". Being recognized as the representative of the detective character in fiction, together with his right-handed man Dr. Watson, Sherlock's adventures in solving crimes with different ranges became popular as Doyle modelled the structure of detective fiction from short story to novel when he wrote *A Study in Scarlet* in 1887, introducing the deductive method distinguishing his detective character and writing style from Poe's (KNIGHT, 1980).

In addition to it, both detectives were characterized as mannish heroes by their creators. Regarding this, Bartell (1997, ch. 17) in his chapter in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction* says: "The hero of detective fiction is an idealized bureaucrat who speaks directly and deeply to the needs of readers, who themselves function as bureaucrats in their jobs or some other aspect of their lives". This suits the necessity

of a representative, in this case the detective, in which people could refer to in the fictional world to suffice their desires of re-establishing the order with the power they did not have in the real world.

Within this perspective of creating a hero who represents and satisfies the needs of the readers, along with female characteristics, the detective Hercule Poirot came into existence.

2.1.1 Hercule Poirot

It all started in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, published in 1920, when Hercule Poirot was presented to the world by Agatha Christie, and was in most of Christie's novels ranging from the 20s to the 70s (MERRILL, 1997). With his eccentricity and approach to solve murders, he conquered a place among Poe's and Doyle's detectives in the fictional world, which made him a reliable detective for Christie's readers.

Known for his French accent for being Belgian, Poirot is described as "[…] short, with an egg-shaped head and a mustache", which makes him appear ridiculous to the point of making people sceptic of his approach to unveil the culprit (WOODS, 1997, ch. 9). Besides his peculiar features, he is also recognized for his feminized characteristics, which are directly connected to the time he was created and his methods to solve crimes.

At the time Christie developed Hercule Poirot, a matter that is going to be discussed in depth in the following section, the audience she created him for was mainly constituted by middle-aged women who had lost the figure of a man in their families, mostly a husband, and who needed comfort and found it in reading. Regarding this, Ackershoek in *Theory and Practice of Classic Detective Fiction* (1997, ch. 11) mentions that "[…] the deaths of so many men in World War I had left a gap in the structure of society that could, and must, be filled by women, including women acting in what had previously been male roles". Trying to supply this empty space, not only with the figure of a feminized man, Agatha Christie also took advantage of women's behaviour to compose Poirot's techniques as a detective.

When complexity and plot-twist meet each other inside a detective story, the name recalled is always Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot. Different from Dupin and Sherlock Holmes, he investigates the suspects by observing details commonly overlooked and by asking irrelevant questions in the perspective of the suspects,

sometimes even for the sleuths working with him (MERRILL, 1997; WOODS, 1997). Discussing Poirot's and Marple's – Christie's first female detective – methods, Ackershoek (1997, ch. 11) writes:

> Both Poirot and Marple draw their power from what were traditionally depicted—and often trivialized—as female attributes or activities: information-gathering through the homely means of gossip and observation of seemingly minor details of domestic life and of human behavior. The seemingly intuitive leaps to conclusions made by Marple and Poirot are, in fact, made through rational analyses of the patterns of information thus acquired, analyses that are 'intuitive' only in that they differ from more authoritarian depictions of reasoning.

Through the rational analysis based on behaviour, the detective inquiries on matters he thinks are relevant for his understanding such as the crime scene and suspicion arising from suspect to suspect. His method recalls the practice of gossiping, in which inducing a person of interest to literally "spill the beans" when she is asked something completely unexpected and insignificant in his/her perspective, will evidence something about their character, giving support to the detective's theory to solve the murder case.

Poirot leads his investigation together with his "Watson-companion" Captain Hastings or another person from the police force. The leading detective is commonly introduced at the beginning of the story when he is invited by Hastings or another policeman to investigate the case or when he is already present in the scene before the crime takes place. As the story moves forward to its disclosure, Poirot ponders and analyses different scenarios to unravel who the criminal is, how the murder took place and why the murder came into existence (MERRILL, 1997).

Another characteristic which distinguishes Poirot from other detectives is what Agatha Christie did as a renowned author of detective fiction and made her conquer her title of "Queen of Mystery". She uses the strategy of recalling all the clues found until a certain moment of the story. This happens when Poirot and the other sleuths or policeman reunite to reflect on the information gathered on the suspects prior to the meeting (MERRIL, 1997). This procedure helps revise all information collected and outline the next steps each character should follow to catch the culprit. This strategy does not only benefit the characters in the story, but also the outsiders who follow the detective perspective: the readers.

With regard to the role of readers in detective stories concerning mainly Christie and her detective Hercule Poirot, along with the change of the narrative structure from short story to novel, the next section discusses the path paved by Agatha Christie and women writers of crime fiction during the notable “Golden Age”.

2.2 The Golden Age

The Golden Age of crime fiction is dated to have started with Agatha Christie’s *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920, a time period ranging from the end of the First World War, until the wake of the Second World War (KNIGHT, 2003; SCAGGS, 2005). In these years, crime fiction changed in many aspects, so the template made by Edgar Allan Poe in the nineteenth century was marked by the societal changes due to the consequences of the “golden summer” of 1914 (ACKERSHOEK, 1997).

As the society was crumbling from the loss of many soldiers who were in the frontline of the battleground and from civilians who died because of the consequences the war brought to Europe, crime fiction stories and characters seemed to comfort or at least relieve the pain of those who lost their beloved ones. Crime writers from the Golden Age such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers, and Margery Allingham, employed aspects to soothe the agony and the feeling of powerlessness to their narratives, which were directly influenced by the events occurred in the previous years. The main feature utilized predominantly by women writers – who were the ones responsible for leading the Golden Age to its current status – was the empowerment of the detective that is “[…] deeply rooted in female experience” as the main audience of crime fiction were women at that time (ACKERSHOEK, 1997, ch. 11).

As already mentioned in the previous section, there was a change in the structure of the narrative of detective fiction in comparison to the ones written before. Regarding this, Priestman in *Detective Fiction and Literature – The Figure on the Carpet* (1991, ch. 9) discusses on the shifting, the way the genre influences the reader and what it enables in relation to this change:

> In the Golden Age the weight of the form shifts on to the novel, where a specific 'world' is more fully evoked, and the detective becomes a more abstract, often much more skimpily visualised figure. The genre becomes much more of a puzzle addressed directly to the reader, with the novel form permitting many more game-like permutations on one hand and much less prodigality with basic plot-ideas on the other.

Through this perspective of eliciting aspects of the real world in the structure of a novel deeper than what the short story allowed, the authors could amplify the scope of their plots by creating a game for their readers, making them play as the detective.

One feature most detective fiction stories have is the locked-room mystery which, as the name already states, happens in a secluded space inside a house commonly located in the countryside. This seclusion to a space where there is not an influence of the life in the city uniquely occurs as a strategy to allow the detective to find the murderer through logical deduction based on the evidence, which grants the reestablishment of order as the mystery comes to a solution (SCAGGS, 2005).

Another feature worth mentioning is related to the characterization of the detective as a hero, in this case a feminized hero, that readers could refer to as they were given human characteristics, making them more realistic than other fictional characters:

> Fictional detectives—described and defined by all of their individual 'properties'—may be perceived almost as if they are real. More than that, when we 'match wits' with or simply admire the detective hero, we make very real comparisons and contrasts between the properties of the detective and the properties of ourselves (PRCHAL, 1997, ch. 3).

However, writing murder stories was not something easy to be done. As many writers were emerging at that time, a club of writers was created. To be part of it and be recognized as an author of detective fiction, you had to submit yourself and play the game by the rules.

2.2.1 The Rules of Fair Play

During the Golden Age there was a boom of detective stories with different formats and one of them is known as the "clue-puzzle" fiction. As the name already states, clue-puzzle refers to a game, a narrative game, in which the reader follows the detective character through the investigation, being provided with the same clues to solve the puzzle and find the culprit of the crime. As many authors were going through distinct paths to write their mysteries, concerns about the relationship between detective and reader regarding the fairness of informing both of them the same clues for the play, without giving an advantage to any of the parts in order to discover the truth, led to the creation of rules of fair play (MERRILL, 1997).

About fair play, Scaggs (2005, ch. 1), while discussing the chronology of crime in *Crime Fiction* writes:

> The idea of fair play is grounded in the notion that the reader should, at least in theory, be able to solve the crime at the heart of a story of detection, and for this reason should have access to the same information as the fictional detective.

Fair play, therefore, becomes a matter taken seriously by many writers as, only towards the end of the Golden Age, the Detection Club was founded. It was 1928 in Britain when Anthony Berkeley founded the club and most of its members were major British novelists of that time. These novelists swore to the Fair Play rules as they took the Detection Club Oath (SCAGGS, 2005).

The Fair Play rules in Britain were published by Father Ronald Knox, a priest and crime story writer in 1929. He based his rules, together with other emphasis, on the rules already created by S.S. Van Dine in the United States in the previous year, which appeared in the essay “Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories”. Knox established “ten basic rules” in his *Detective Story Decalogue*, echoing almost the same ideas as Van Dine (SCAGGS, 2005). What they differed from Van Dine’s was the vehemence given to “[…] clarity and unity of technique, as well as fair play, matters which Knox repeats in condensed form, adding advice against plagiarism: individual rights and duties are always central to the form” (KNIGHT, 2003, ch. 5).

Van Dine’s rules were summarized in eight points by Tzvetan Todorov (1977, p. 49) in his *The Typology of Detective Fiction*, as he considered the rules in the original format quite prolix:

1. The novel must have at most one detective and one criminal, and at least one victim (a corpse).
2. The culprit must not be a professional criminal, must not be the detective, must kill for personal reasons.
3. Love has no place in detective fiction.
4. The culprit must have a certain importance:
   (a) in life: not be a butler or a chambermaid.
   (b) in the book: must be one of the main characters.
5. Everything must be explained rationally; the fantastic is not admitted.
6. There is no place for descriptions nor for psychological analyses.
7. With regard to information about the story, the following homology must be observed: “author : reader = criminal : detective.”
8. Banal situations and solutions must be avoided (Van Dine lists ten).

The summarized rules clearly present the facet of the relationship between reader and detective, as point number 7 remarks. On this basis, the reader has a

fundamental role as he is the one playing the game together with the detective and follows the rules laid by the author of the story. To epitomize the ideas inside the “clue-puzzle” fiction on rules of fair play and the reader, Knight (2003, ch. 5) writes:

> The clue-puzzle does this directly in inviting the reader to participate, and many of its compulsive features emphasise this function: the need for ‘fair play’, the reader-testing obsession with red herrings, the dropping of the intermediary Watson, the flat style and the two-dimensional characterisation all create a space for the reader to encounter the author and construct a writerly self.

These rules were the core of every detective story, even though some authors would not adhere to one or two rules but would reason why they lacked this fairness such as what Agatha Christie did as the “Queen of Crime”.

2.2.2 Agatha Christie

Agatha Christie started writing after her sister challenged her to write a novel in 1916, when she was 26 years old (KNIGHT, 2003). She became famous for her mystery and detective stories; her first novel was *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, published in 1920. This novel introduced her most famous detective to the world, Hercule Poirot, and made her known for her “[…] uncanny grasp of the plot variations available within the conventional detective format” (MERRILL, 1997, ch. 8).

She is commonly referred as the “Queen of Mystery” or “Queen of Crime” by many critics and by her readers. She is known as a queen because she mastered what Stephen Knight calls “clue-puzzle” fiction, in which a narrative game is played by the readers who follow the detective to discover the *whodunnit* (SCAGGS, 2005; KNIGHT, 2004). The Poirot novels are examples of this mastering, as Christie “[…] requires us to play the same game as Poirot, even if we almost never ‘win’” (MERRILL, 1997, ch. 8).

Readers have a fundamental role in all Christie works as she invites them to this journey of finding out the murderer. Christie is required to “[…] play as fair as possible with the clues […]” as they are the only information the readers share with the detective (MERRILL, 1997, ch. 8). Nevertheless, even by providing the same evidence, the detective’s perception on them differs from the one the reader has, a characteristic that made her achieve a higher level inside detective fiction as she presents “[…] dazzling

surprises provoked by the revelation of her murderers' identities" (HARK, 1997, ch. 10).

On her view, "[…] no such creature as a person incapable of murder exists", which led her to create stories with incredible plot twists as in the 1934 novel *Murder on the Orient Express*, in which all of the passengers in the train contributed to the murder (HARK, 1997, ch. 10). This created the idea of the most-likely and the least-likely of committing a crime, used by many critics to refer to these detective stories in which the evidence presented sustains the suspect's alibi, making him a non-suspect at the first inquiry. In this perspective,

> 'The prime suspect—the person who stands to gain the most—has an apparently iron-clad alibi for a murder he or she in fact committed' (137). By accepting their alibis or otherwise vouching for them initially, Christie investigators habitually transform most likely suspects into nonsuspects in the reader's mind (GILL, 1990, p. 137 *apud* HARK, 1997, ch. 10).

The crimes depicted in Christie's novels are known for happening in a society in which murder is an appropriate crime to be committed, as the middle-class residents of this secluded area where the crime occurs are materialistic and "[…] believe there are only two ways to make money […]": through inheritance or marriage (ACKERSHOEK, 1997, ch. 11). The main reason behind the author's choice to characterize her narrative is to disclose the "[…] fragility of this privileged class […]" when it comes to acquiring what they desire, mostly power or vengeance (BARTELL, 1997, ch. 17).

On the criminals created by Agatha Christie, Knight (2003, ch. 5) arguments:

> Christie's criminals are traitors to the class and world which is so calmly described, and their identification, through the systems of limited knowledge and essentially domestic inquiry, is a process of exorcising the threats that this society nervously anticipates within its own membership: the multiple suspect structure has special meaning in a competitive individualist world.

In order to catch these culprits, Christie uses different methods in her novels to introduce the characters and the space the crime occurs followed by its description. Another characteristic of her "clue-puzzle" fiction is the order of the narrative, characteristic to this kind of fiction, in which two stories are told: the story of the crime and the story of its investigation (KNIGHT, 2004; RYAN, 2007; TODOROV, 1977).

As to this structural arrangement of detective and "clue-puzzle" fiction, the next section addresses the common narrative elements found in them as well as

characteristics concerning the narrative of Agatha Christie's Hercule Poirot stories, which are the focus of this research.

2.3 Narrative Structure of Detective Fiction

Up to this section, some aspects regarding the narrative structure of detective stories were briefly mentioned. These elements are important in order to understand why the structural organization of these stories grasps readers' attention and curiosity and becomes recognised worldwide. To perceive the ideas concerning the narrative structure, this segment gives an insight on the characteristics of detective fiction.

As the starting point of this discussion, the idea of a detective fiction having two stories, referred by Todorov (1977), is the first aspect which readers can observe while reading a narrative from this kind of fiction. He says there is the story of the crime, told in the first pages, and the story of its investigation, conducted by the detective in the following hundred and something pages. The uncovering of the killer's identity only occurs in the last chapters; it is when the private investigator discloses his analysis to all of the suspects of the crime and the sleuths who helped him with the investigation.

Concerning this view of the two narratives, Scaggs (2005, ch. 1) mentions the "[…] technique of working backwards to bring the narrative to its climax". For it to happen, the detective goes back into the past of the suspects trying to uncover the reason why the murder came into existence throughout the story of the investigation. From Todorov's (1977, p. 45) perspective,

> […] the second story consists, in fact, in explaining how this very book came to be written. The first story ignores the book completely, that is, it never confesses its literary nature […]. On the other hand, the second story is not only supposed to take the reality of the book into account, but it is precisely the story of that very book.

This idea of having two stories kills the element of surprise in relation to the murder itself. As Paul Cobley (2014, ch. 1) says, "[…] narrative has a metaphorical aspect where something different is offered in place of the expected item"; what is offered in this case is the surprising revelation of the *whodunnit* by the end of the story.

The term *whodunnit* was used "[…] to describe a type of fiction in which the puzzle or mystery element was the central focus"; it is the main question that guides most of the detective stories written during the Golden Age (SCAGGS, 2005, ch. 2).

Thompson, A. and Thompson, J. (1997, ch. 5) give a pertinent explanation of the meaning behind the term:

> The ‘it’ of ‘whodunnit’ is the crime, typically murder; the ‘who’ is a character, identity enigmatic; the ‘dun’ involves that character having been in hurtful, criminal contiguity with another character, typically with fatal results.

In regard to it, they also sustain the notion of a connection between criminal and crime through the reading of the clues presented during the investigation, allowing a linkage between them in form of a puzzle the solution to which is provided by the detective who answers the questions and recalls the depiction of the murder (THOMPSON, A.; THOMPSON, J., 1997).

To achieve these features, it is important to take into consideration a few other structural elements responsible for providing a memorable experience to crime readers. The ones which are presented in the following sub-sections concern the order, the space, and the characters of the narrative. The role of the reader in relation to what the author of crime fiction presents to him/her is also addressed.

2.3.1 Order

In narrative, the sequence of events is relevant to the understanding of what is narrated. For detective fiction stories, the order adopted by the author for presenting first the crime and then its investigation reveals a path characterized by expectation and memory, as we read the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end (COBLEY, 2014).

Through this perspective of having the end in the beginning and the beginning in the end, David Herman (2007, ch. 1) discussing Todorov’s argument on narrative says that,

> […] narratives prototypically follow a trajectory leading from an initial state of equilibrium, through a phase of disequilibrium, to an endpoint at which equilibrium is restored (on a different footing) because of intermediary events […].

Those intermediary events mentioned by Herman (2007) are the ones that occur in the second story, as the detective investigates the circumstances the crime was carried out. For this private investigator to discover the identity of the culprit, the author of the story commonly appeals to the use of flashbacks “[…] in order to fill in the

past history of protagonists while avoiding a lengthy introduction or in order to reveal new facts" (BRIDGEMAN, 2007, ch. 4).

Gérard Genette (1980, p. 36) in *Narrative Discourse: An essay in method* notices the existence of narrative *anachronies*, which he calls the "[…] various types of discordance between the two orderings of story and narrative […]". This means that *anachronies* are those changes in story in which the narrative shifts to another period in time in relation to the present, reaching the past or the future.

For detective fiction, it is common to see *analepses*, the flashbacks, throughout the story as they are "[…] any evocation after the fact of an event that took place earlier than the point in the story where we are at any given moment […]" (GENETTE, 1980, p. 40). As said before, they are employed to corroborate the evidence already found as facts from the past emerge.

Although the order of the narrative displays a feature of narrative as a whole, the following section extends to a specific characteristic of detective fiction narrative, in respect of the space it is located.

2.3.2 Space

The spaces described and frequented by characters in narrative are essential to picture the actions occurring; they characterize the story narrated and may or may not resemble the real world (COBLEY, 2014). They are depicted and given importance in the story according to what the author judges to be important to the comprehension of the facts presented.

Teresa Bridgeman's (2007, ch. 4) discussion on *Time and Space* in narrative values the significance of both elements to the comprehension of the text:

> Time and space are thus more than background elements in narrative; they are part of its fabric, affecting our basic understanding of a narrative text and of the protocols of different narrative genres. They profoundly influence the way in which we build mental images of what we read.

Focusing on space, in the "clue-puzzle" fiction, mainly in Christie's stories, the use of objects such as clocks, is as helpful as the relevant evidence that emerges from the detective's observation and the interrogatory of the suspects because readers mentally construct the scene of the crime (SCAGGS, 2005). The description of these elements enables the visualization of them and allows an imagery of "[…] the way in

which characters inhabit the space of their world both socially and psychologically […]" (BRIDGEMAN, 2007, ch. 4).

The inhabitation of characters in the places described is another feature that connects the structural elements already introduced. To summarize the relevance of space in detective narratives, Bridgeman (2007, ch. 4) writes:

> […] when considering space in narrative, we should not neglect how useful spatial information is in keeping track of what is going on. Our association of certain locations with the events that occur in them is particularly strong in our reading of narrative. As a basic mechanism of reading, in texts which develop more than one plot-line at once, location allows us to identify rapidly a return to an already-established ongoing scene […].

To keep track of all the events described and to give life to the narrative, the characters created by authors of detective novels are fundamental elements of the narrative structure of detective fiction.

2.3.3 Characters

As one of the main elements of the narrative structure, the characters are the ones responsible for bringing the events narrated into existence. To readers, they are the connection between the fictional world portrayed in the story and the real world where their stories are read.

In order to understand what a character represents in narrative, Uri Margolin (2007, ch. 5) gives a general definition by saying that,

> In the widest sense, 'character' designates any entity, individual or collective – normally human or human-like – introduced in a work of narrative fiction. Characters thus exist within storyworlds, and play a role, no matter how minor, in one or more of the states of affairs or events told about in the narrative. Character can be succinctly defined as storyworld participant.

Having realistic features and relying on the space created to exist, they bring life to the stories as readers position themselves in a character's perspective, mostly in the character narrating the events. It happens in detective stories in which the reader follows the private investigator's steps to solve the crime.

In relation to the role of characters in the two stories of detective fiction, Todorov (1977, p. 44) states,

> The characters of this second story, the story of the investigation, do not act, they learn. Nothing can happen to them: a rule of the genre postulates the detective's immunity.

The idea of acting brought by Todorov's statement is that the characters cannot act in the sense of committing a crime during the investigation. However, the characters can and do act throughout the investigation, as they inflict their perspectives on the crime and reveal facts about their lives to the detective when they are inquired. When disclosing their statements on the crime and the suspects by characterizing the victim and the most-likely person for committing murder, they attribute characteristics not only to these people, but also to themselves as the private investigator evinces his logical deduction (MARGOLIN, 2007).

Another important aspect regarding the characters in detective stories, now focusing on the "clue-puzzle" fiction mastered by Agatha Christie in relation to order and space, is that her stories emphasize the sequence of events starting from the committed murder, going through the investigation in which suspense arises, until reaching a resolution in the end; this happens in an illustrated space that controls the actions narrated and with "[…] characters who are themselves engaged in acts of reading, writing, and interpretation […]" (PYRHÖNEN, 2007, ch. 8).

Margolin (2007, ch. 5) writes that characters […] are shaped by their authors to attain certain ends and effects […]". To the authors' choice, "[…] it makes perfect sense to inquire why and to what end they endowed their characters with this particular selection of features", as it shapes the relationship between reader and text (MARGOLIN, 2007, ch. 5). This relationship is addressed in the following section.

2.3.4 The role of the reader in Agatha Christie's mysteries

When reading a "clue-puzzle" story as the ones written by Agatha Christie, the reader is invited to play a game by following the private investigator's analysis of the crime and the suspects to discover the *whodunnit*. As the story is constructed to readers, they become a fundamental piece of its structure.

Christie's novels provide the readers a unique experience as they play the role of the detective. This roleplay allows them to go on a journey of deduction based on the evidence found throughout the narrative, undergoing a fictional adventure based on realistic features. Regarding the emotions stimulated while reading,

> Suspense arises from the gap between what we have been told so far and what we anticipate lies ahead. Curiosity arises from the gap between what we have been told of the past and what else we imagine might have happened. Surprise arises when a twist in the order of narrative conceals from us an event which is subsequently revealed (BRIDGEMAN, 2007, ch. 4).

By experiencing these emotions through the narrative, readers "[…] may adopt a perspective suggested by the text […]", which may result in an interpretation suitable for the real world (BRIDGEMAN, 2007, ch. 4). Another characteristic that causes those emotions to emerge in detective fiction is the reader's interpretation of the "[…] different views of the same events by different characters" (BRIDGEMAN, 2007, ch. 4). Hence, readers become aware of the suspects' perspectives on the crime and start deducing the suspect most likely of committing the crime as the same event is narrated for them more than once.

Related to this depiction of the crime by different characters, Pyrhönen (2007, ch. 8) says that as the reader "[…] mirrors the detective's interpretive activity", the notion of rules of fair play are for them an equal chance to discover the *whodunnit*. Although the rules help readers in finding the identity before or at the same time as the detective, the famous "red-herrings" or the imitation of clues sometimes interfere on reading correctly the evidence presented, leading to a wrongful deduction (MACDONALD, 1997).

This chapter presented relevant topics fundamental to the comprehension of detective fiction and the narrative structure of detective stories. First, a review on crime fiction and the emergence of the genre was discussed. Second, the figure of the detective was exemplified by the three most-known detectives in the fictional world, having Hercule Poirot as a focus.

Then, the Golden Age of detective fiction, its rules of fair play, and the "Queen of Crime" Agatha Christie were explored. Finally, the narrative structure of detective fiction, in which were emphasized the order, the space, the character, and the role of the reader in Christie's mysteries were addressed.

The next chapter introduces the book *Cards on the Table* (2016) by Agatha Christie, the object of analysis of this paper, going briefly through its structure, characters, and narrative.

3 *CARDS ON THE TABLE*

Agatha Christie first published the Poirot novel *Cards on the Table* in 1936 (KNIGHT, 2004; MERRILL, 1997). The book described here in this chapter refers to the version published in 2016 by HarperCollins Publishers (CHRISTIE, 2016). When compared with the previous detective stories written by her featuring Hercule Poirot, the mystery he investigates is ingenious as stated in the book's foreword.

At the beginning of the statement, it is mentioned a common idea that to discover who committed the crime you need to spot the least likely person from a number of suspects, as in a race of horses and jockeys in which you pay and choose your favourite one to win (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Although most stories of this kind of fiction follow this idea, the narrator alerts the readers that the book is not abiding to it. There are only four suspects and, as stated by Merrill (1997, ch. 8), it is "[…] the lowest number in any Christie novel […]", all of them are equally suspected to have murdered the victim if […] *given the right circumstances* […]" (CHRISTIE, 2016, local. 56, author emphasis added).

Different from all Christie's novels having Poirot as the lead of the investigation, *Cards on the Table*'s suspects have all committed murder before with their motives being peculiar to them as their methods, making all of them capable of committing murder again. This feature of only four characters as suspects of murder allows an equal treatment of each one of them, as the sleuths investigate their past to uncover the truth behind the crime (CHRISTIE, 2016).

In relation to the method of analysis used by the detective to find the culprit's identity, the narrator emphasizes that "[…] the deduction must, therefore, be entirely *psychological* […]" (CHRISTIE, 2016, local. 56, author emphasis added). However, this does not make the book uninteresting as it makes the murderer's mind the dominant interest for readers (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Also, to support the previous arguments on the narrative experiment that invites Christie's readers to journey, it is said this is one of Poirot's favourite cases even though his friend, Captain Hastings, disagrees with it as he considered the story not interesting after Poirot describes it to him (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Cards on the Table (2016) is divided into 31 chapters; the first three chapters narrate the story of the crime, and the following 28 chapters tell the story of its

investigation. The resolution of the crime occurs in the last two chapters in which Poirot discloses the murderer's identity.

Before going through the two stories of the book, the story of the crime and the story of the investigation, the characters and the bridge game played by them in the book are described in the following sections.

3.1 The Victim

The victim of *Cards on the Table*, Mr. Shaitana, a wealthy man known for his eccentric collection of objects related to crimes, is physically described as,

> […] tall and thin, his face was long and melancholy, his eyebrows were heavily accented and jet black, he wore a moustache with stiff waxed ends and a tiny black imperial. His clothes were works of art – of exquisite cut – but with a suggestion of the bizarre (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 1).

As his acquaintances do not know his nationality, he is often called a *Dago*, "used as an insulting and contemptuous term for a person of Italian or Spanish birth or descent" (DAGO, 2021). Even though he has a shocking appearance, he is rich and famous for holding astonishing parties of varied forms, such as gruesome parties portraying death (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Shaitana is someone who people are afraid of, as he often displays an image "[…] that he knew a little too much about everybody", besides having a curious sense of humour (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 1). This characteristic is also portrayed by his facial feature as he is always looking as he is the devil himself (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.2 The Sleuths

The detectives or sleuths are the ones who investigate the murder of Mr. Shaitana due to the fact they were all in a room next to the one in which the crime occurred. They all have their own methods of inquiring the suspects as the investigation proceeds.

3.2.1 Hercule Poirot

Hercule Poirot, an amateur private investigator known for solving the most intriguing crimes with plot twisting ends, is involved in another crime investigation after being invited to a dinner by his acquaintance, who becomes the victim of the murder committed at his own place.

In the book, Poirot is not specifically described by the narrative voice, as it is not his first investigation as a private detective. Some physical and intellectual characteristics are given by other characters, such as being a "[…] ridiculous-looking little man […]", often mistaken as French though being Belgian (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 1). Also, one of the suspects of the crime even says he knows him for his "little grey cells – order and method", referring to his peculiar technique of investigation to solve crimes (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 4).

Concerning his method, the answer for the *whodunnit* results from his punctilious observation of the material evidence in the crime scene and the evidence provided through the inquiry of the suspects (CHRISTIE, 2016)

3.2.2 Ariadne Oliver

Mrs. Ariadne Oliver is known as a detective stories' writer and recognized for her unstoppable argument that Scotland Yard should have a woman occupying its highest post. She is also someone who trusts women's intuitive feeling as she thinks they are the ones who can solve the crimes men cannot (CHRISTIE, 2016).

She is described in the book as,

> [..] an agreeable woman of middle age, handsome in a rather untidy fashion with fine eyes, substantial shoulders and a large quantity of rebellious grey hair with which she was continually experimenting. One day her appearance would be highly intellectual—a brow with the hair scraped back from it and coiled in a large bun in the neck—on another Mrs Oliver would suddenly appear with Madonna loops, or large masses of slightly untidy curls (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 2).

As someone who trusts her own intuition, she approaches the evidence of the crime and the suspects through inflicting her theories to them. To understand what a suspect's thoughts on other suspects are, she explains her suppositions on the crime

for them and based on their reaction she confirms or not her suspicion (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.2.3 Superintendent Battle

One of the best representatives of Scotland Yard, Superintendent Battle is depicted as kind and polite man, even though having a wooden face conveying an impression of coldness. As one of the guests in Shaitana's residence at the night of the murder, he is the one with most authority to start the investigation after finding the victim. He and Hercule Poirot turn out to be the heads of the investigation, as both already worked together in another case (CHRISTIE, 2016).

As to his method of inquiry, he questions the suspects' relationship with the victim and to the other suspects. In addition to it, he asks the suspected person to describe her movements and the movements of the others in the room where the murder occurred (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.2.4 Colonel Race

Colonel Race, another guest and sleuth in Mr. Shaitana's residence, is described as a "[…] dark, handsome, deeply bronzed man of fifty […]" (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 2). Poirot says his activities are related to the Secret Service, as he often goes overseas for different reasons (CHRISTIE, 2016).

On his method of investigation, he is the one who obtains relevant information about the past of one of the suspects of the crime. The evidence he acquires after contacting his sources is helpful to understand what had happened in the suspect's life previous to the time Mr. Shaitana was murdered (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.3 The Suspects

In Christie's (2016) novel, the suspects of murdering the victim are all treated equally, as all four suspects have already committed murder. They have done it by using different methods and each one of them has done it for distinct reasons.

The next sub-sections give an overview of the suspects' physical characteristics and general information about their lives. Other characters that are part of the story and important to understand the suspects' past are also described.

3.3.1 Dr. Roberts

The first suspect is Dr. Roberts. He is described as "[…] a cheerful, highly-coloured individual of middle age", with a stout and clean image as a medical practitioner (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 2). His behaviour exhilarates confidence and joy as he interacts with the other guests.

About his personal life he is unmarried and an only child who followed his father's path into medicine. As a doctor he is directly connected to death as some of his patients died of natural causes. But what is of interest about his past is the suspicious deaths of those he treated not long before they died (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.3.2 Mrs. Lorrimer

Mrs. Lorrimer is a sexagenarian widow who, "[…] had finely cut features, beautifully arranged grey hair, and a clear, incisive voice" (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 2). She is described as a wise and knowledgeable person, and also depicted by other characters as one of the best bridge players at the dinner (CHRISTIE, 2016).

In regard to Mrs. Lorrimer as a suspect in the murder of Mr. Shaitana, the secret she buried deeply in her past is what rises her suspicion of having committed murder again, as the victim might have learned somehow what she was trying to hide (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.3.3 Major Despard

With a similar physique as Colonel Race, Major Despard is a tall man, with a small but noticeable scar on his face, but that does not make him less handsome. Known for having travelled to different places in the world, most of them being exhilarating wild places, he is a man who attends parties when he is invited, even though disagreeing with that society (CHRISTIE, 2016).

His suspiciousness arises after deliberately saying that he disliked Mr. Shaitana because something about the way he dressed bothered him. Related to him being a murderer, a presumed accident from a past travel is what makes the detectives investigate his background deeply to discover what really occurred at that time, in order to figure out if he is the suspect who committed the murder of Mr. Shaitana (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.3.4 Anne Meredith

Miss Anne Meredith, the youngest guest and suspect, is around her twenties. She is described as having a shier personality composed with a slow voice and a pretty face. Despite being young, she is mature in comparison to what she conveys (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Ms. Meredith's past is characterized by the loss of her parents, her mother when she was eleven and her father when she was eighteen. Being left without much money, she started working as a nursemaid and went to different residences in which she did a variety of housework. In one of these stays, someone died due to an accident involving poisoning, a situation which makes detectives suspicious, as it might not have been an accident at all (CHRISTIE, 2016).

3.3.5 Other Characters

In *Cards on the Table* (2016), there are other three characters who are directly connected to some of the suspects, as they are the ones who provide evidence about the past incidents involving the accidental deaths.

The first one mentioned is Miss Rhoda Dawes, a friend and companion of Anne Meredith. They have been friends since school and, as a devoted friend, Ms. Dawes even helped her to get a job at her aunt's residence when she was looking for a place to work. She is the one who tells additional and crucial information about Ms. Meredith's past to one of the sleuths; this helps the investigative team understand her hidden behaviour (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Another character who gives an important report on the past of Dr. Roberts is Elsie Batt, a maid who served the late Mrs. Craddock, one of the doctor's patients. She gives Sergeant O'Connor, the one who meets her at Superintendent's Battle behest to

question on the relationship of her late masters with the doctor, to obtain information on how the doctor was involved with them and their questionable deaths (CHRISTIE, 2016).

The last character here described is Mrs. Luxmore, the widow of a professor who died in the Amazon during a research travel. She accompanied her husband who was researching rare plants in the expedition led by Major Despard. Poirot is the one who questions her whether Professor Luxmore really died because of a fever or his death was a tragedy she wanted to keep from the world (CHRISTIE, 2016).

A remarkable and shared action between the suspects and the sleuths is the card game played in the story, which is the main evidence used by Poirot to solve Mr. Shaitana's murder. The next section gives a brief insight into the characteristics of the bridge game and reasons it is important to the detection conducted by the sleuths.

3.4 The Bridge Game

The card game played in *Cards on the Table* (2016) is a composite one, as it requires strategies and tactics to be played (MANLEY *et al*, 2011). This section gives a brief explanation on what bridge is, how it is played, and the importance of it to discover the *whodunnit*.

Contract bridge or simply "bridge", derived from the English game of whist commonly played during the eighteenth and nineteenth century. Bridge is a very complex card game with different variations and characteristics. The game uses a 52-card deck, having 13 cards distributed to each of the four players.

Each player sits in a position representing the four cardinal directions – North, East, South, and West – and is paired with the person sitting across, North pairs with South, and East pairs with West. The main objective of the game is to win more points than the other pair.

It all starts with the dealing of the cards being followed by the bidding to get the contract. Bidding in bridge requires the partners to communicate without saying a word, that is, through signals, in order for them to know if the hand they have is strong or weak. The aim of bidding is to guess how many tricks the partnership can get, and which suit will be the highest card played, the trump suit.

The pair who wins most points during the bidding gets the contract and has to fulfil it, while the other pair has to try to stop them. The partner who has bid the trump

suit first, has to lay down his cards so that his partner is able to play with both hands. The one who lays down the cards is known as Dummy.

As the bidding process is very complicated to explain since there are many ways and probabilities involved as well as different kinds of bridge that are played all around the world, what is of interest in the game for the investigation of Mr. Shaitana's murder in Christie's (2016) novel is the role of the dummy.

The dummy, as he lays his cards on the table, is not obligated to stay seated while his partner is playing the contract. That means he can wander around the room where bridge is being played and even commit murder.

Having the card game explained, in the next sections the story of the crime and the story of the investigation of the crime narrated in *Cards on the Table* (2016), in which the bridge game's scoring is the main evidence, are summarily addressed.

3.5 The Crime

The story of *Cards on the Table* starts in the Exhibition of Snuffboxes at Wessex House, the place where Hercule Poirot meets an acquaintance, Mr. Shaitana, a wealthy man with a "[…] a *very* fine moustache – the only moustache in London, perhaps, that could compete with that of M. Hercule Poirot" (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 1, author emphasis added). While discussing the objects related to crimes collected by Mr. Shaitana, Poirot asks him what he considers to be the best ones in crime. Shaitana then answers him: "the human beings who commit them, M. Poirot" (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 1).

As Poirot is astonished by the answer, Shaitana then explains his artistic perspective on murderers and says he collects only the best, being they "[…] *the ones who have got away with it!* […]" (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 1, author emphasis added). After that, Shaitana has an idea to display his collection by holding a dinner at his place for Hercule Poirot to meet his exhibits. The dinner, then, is set to occur on Friday 18th, at eight o'clock.

When Poirot arrives at Mr. Shaitana's residency, he is welcomed by the host and greets a few acquaintances he has met before. Mrs. Ariadne Oliver – a writer of detective's stories – and Superintendent Battle – a Scotland Yard's representative. He is also introduced to Colonel Race, someone whose activities, in Poirot's view, are related to the Secret Service (CHRISTIE, 2016).

After the greetings, Mr. Shaitana says he thinks his guests are late because he might have said the time was 8:15 instead of 8 o'clock. Then, the guests start to arrive; the first one is Dr. Roberts and the next guests to arrive are Mrs. Lorrimer, Major Despard, and Miss Anne Meredith respectively (CHRISTIE, 2016).

They have a little conversation in small groups about work, travel, and the people who are there. Then, the butler comes and says the dinner is ready. All guests go to the dining room and eat together. Towards finishing dinner, they all start to talk with the ones who are sitting next to them, and Mr. Shaitana makes a statement on how to kill without being caught, the topic some of the guests were discussing during dinner (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Shaitana says that a doctor has opportunities to kill someone as they have easy access to poison; if he had to commit a crime, he would kill someone in a simple way by shooting and disguising it as an accident or taking the safest way as killing in a domestic environment and having it portrayed as an unfortunate event (CHRISTIE, 2016).

When the visitors end their meal, they go back to the same room they were in when they arrived. Since the servants placed a bridge table there while the guests were dining, they all decide to play the card game. As the game is played only by four participants, Mr. Shaitana divides them in two rooms, coincidently one room having only the murderers and the other one having the sleuths (CHRISTIE, 2016).

As the host and someone who does not enjoy playing bridge, Shaitana goes from room to room to watch his guests. He then sits down at a chair near the fireplace in the same room the murderers are and stays there. When the sleuths finish their game, they go to the room looking for Mr. Shaitana, who is still sitting at the same chair, deadly (CHRISTIE, 2016).

When Colonel Race and Hercule Poirot notice that he is dead, they call Superintendent Battle to get hold of the situation. The latter then communicates the host's death to everyone in the room, which is taken by surprise to all guests. Afterwards, Battle questions the ones who were in the same room where the victim was found if anyone left or entered the room while they were playing bridge, or if any of them went near the fireplace during the game (CHRISTIE, 2016).

As stated by the guests that no one entered or left the room when they were playing, Major Despard says that all of them went near the fireplace or to get drinks. Then, after calling the local police, Superintendent Battle asks the suspects – Dr.

Roberts, Mrs. Lorrimer, Major Despard, and Miss Meredith – to go to another room and wait until he calls them to inquire. Meanwhile, Poirot gets close to the bridge table and takes a look at the scores of the game and realizes that Shaitana disguised himself as the devil and ended up dead (CHRISTIE, 2016).

When the divisional police workers arrive, “the routine of the detection of crime had begun” (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 3).

3.6 The Investigation

The investigation starts with the sleuths reuniting in the dining room and sharing their thoughts on what happened at that night. Battle first asks Poirot, as he stated before if there was something uncommon behind the purpose of that meeting. Poirot then tells the sleuths the conversation he had with the victim about his exhibits, the murderers (CHRISTIE, 2016).

They all give their insights into who they think might have murdered Mr. Shaitana and start the inquiry. Dr. Roberts is the first one to be questioned, followed by Mrs. Lorrimer, Anne Meredith, and Major Despard respectively. Battle asks about the suspects’ relationship with the victim and the other suspects, as well as who they think committed the crime. Unlike Battle’s inquiry, Hercule Poirot asks the suspects about the game of bridge and their companions as bridge players (CHRISTIE, 2016).

After the first questioning, the sleuths discuss their guesses on which one of the suspects murdered Shaitana and how they would get information about their lives, mainly about their past and the people who died around them. Each one of them follows their own style of inquiry, by getting information on death by accident, from the people around the suspects, and by asking the unexpected questions (CHRISTIE, 2016).

The last inquiry is done some time later by Poirot who uses a method in which he visits the suspects and asks each one of them to describe each movement of the bridge game played at the night of the murder, showing them the scores to help them remember how it went. He also asks them to describe the room they were in (CHRISTIE, 2016).

As the investigation goes on, the detectives reunite again to discuss the information they have gathered so far about the suspects and what they have concluded about each one of them. As they get evidence from the past of each

suspect, they start to understand the deaths around them and that an accident might not have been an accident at all (CHRISTIE, 2016).

Towards the end of the investigation and after inflicting situations to discover the true nature of each suspect, Poirot shares what he concluded after observing the suspects' behaviour. The following events to this reunion are the plead of one of the suspects to be the murderer of Mr. Shaitana, the suicide of a suspect, and an attempt to murder (CHRISTIE, 2016).

In the last two chapters, Poirot then discloses the murderer's identity after making a trap and successfully getting the murderer to plead guilty. His exposure of the *whodunnit* catches the sleuths by surprise and answers all the questions that emerged after the crimes (CHRISTIE, 2016).

In this chapter, *Cards on the Table* (2016) was briefly introduced, starting from its structure, and going through the description of the characters, the concept of the bridge game, the story of the crime and the story of the investigation narrated in the book.

The next chapter analyses and discusses the narrative structure of *Cards on the Table (2016)* and the idea of fair play in the book.

4 STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF *CARDS ON THE TABLE*

This chapter deals with the analysis of *Cards on the Table* narrative structure and the fair play with the reader. In the first four sections, four aspects of the narrative structure of detective fiction are analysed. In the last section, two points of fair play, summarized by Todorov (1977), are examined. In addition to it, the role of the reader is also addressed throughout the analysis.

4.1 The Genre

When it comes to Agatha Christie's books, the similarity among them is commonly noticed in terms of what kind of book it is. Most of the stories have the presence of a detective who is Poirot or someone from the police force. To discover the *whodunnit*, the method often employed is the observation of ignored details and the behaviour of the people as evidence.

Poirot's novels are often labelled under crime, detective, and mystery. As the story narrated in the book tells a crime, has a detective, and has mystery as its main plot, it is difficult to place them in only one genre. These characteristics present in Christie's narratives are one of the reasons why she has been named as the "Queen of Crime".

Cards on the Table is nonetheless one of the few books written by Christie in which the labels mentioned are insufficient to classify the outstanding narrative created by her. Although most of her stories can be labelled under the "clue-puzzle" fiction, a term used by Knight (2004) to describe what he calls the "Christie approach" – her writing style –, the events narrated in the book, which commonly do not appear in any other Poirot novel, and her statement of the book as a narrative experiment, written in the book's foreword, are the reasons why the "clue-puzzle" genre is also not enough to categorize *Cards on the Table*.

Tzvetan Todorov's (1977) statement brings a perspective which conforms to the idea of classifying the book written by Christie under the existing genres – crime, detective, mystery, "clue-puzzle" – and labelling it beneath the genre created with that very book:

> One might say that every great book establishes the existence of two genres, the reality of two norms: that of the genre it transgresses, which dominated

> the preceding literature, and that of the genre it creates (TODOROV, 1977, p. 43).

It is dared to say that *Cards on the Table* transgresses the “clue-puzzle” fiction and ramifies a sub-genre, in which the rules of fair play of detective fiction become merely a reference that directs writers to play fair with the readers. Thus, by losing the authoritative characteristic of the rules, authors can create their own masterpiece as there is no wrong and no right for the perspective adopted by them.

Besides, what they add or remove from the narrative structure is what keeps the ramification flourishing, as one of the main characteristics of crime fiction – here as the main branch – is its ability to change according to the circumstances and to absorb new characteristics as new branches emerge (SCAGGS, 2005).

The next section addresses the order of the narrative in *Cards on the Table*, which is another structural feature related to the concept of genre concerning the book.

4.2 The Order

The sequence of events narrated in a story is responsible for creating a unique and intriguing journey for readers. In Christie’s (2016) book, this is no different as the order of the incidents narrated creates a complex and different characteristic in comparison to other novels written by her. Adopting Todorov’s (1977) perspective in which there are two stories being told in a detective fiction, – the story of the crime and the story of the investigation –, the order of the events presented in *Cards on the Table* are discussed.

The book first narrates the story of the crime, starting from the meeting of Hercule Poirot and Mr. Shaitana in an exhibition that leads to the invitation to a dinner at Shaitana’s residence, who aims to display his collection of “living murderers”. Then, the dinner event unfolds and ends with the murder of the host, which happens when the guests are playing bridge. From this point on, the story of the investigation starts.

The story of the investigation, in this kind of narrative, often follows a pre-elaborated course, in which the investigators go into the suspects’ past in order to make sense of the present. The shifting of the story to a moment in the past – an *anachrony* –, often appears with the presence of *analepses* that sustain the emerging evidence (GENETTE, 1980).

In *Cards on the Table*, each one of the sleuths visits or sends someone in their place to question a person related to a suspect's past. During the questioning, the person refers to events in which someone related to the suspect died, thus corroborating the necessary evidence to comprehend the suspects' behaviour towards death.

The flashbacks used in this type of fiction are commonly impartial, as the objective is to tell what really happened without inflicting "red-herrings" or the teller's own opinion, unless he is asked by the detective. As the method used by Poirot to solve the crime has to be entirely through a psychological approach, the infliction of "red-herrings" becomes a concern.

Also, in relation the use of flashbacks and the infliction of "red-herrings" in the book, something curious or at least intriguing for readers of Poirot's novels is the role of the bridge game to catch the real murder. By asking some unexpected questions to the suspects, as if they can reconstruct the game based on the scores, Poirot is able to perceive the opportune moment for the murder to happen:

> 'There is something else.' He produced the bridge scores. 'Here are the first three rubbers played. I wondered if you could help me with the aid of these scores to reconstruct the hands.'
> 'Let me see.' Mrs. Lorrimer looked interested. She bent over the scores.
> 'That was the first rubber. Miss Meredith and I were playing against the two men. The first game was played in four spades. We made it and an over trick. Then the next hand was left at two diamonds and Dr. Roberts went down one trick on it. There was quite a lot of bidding on the third hand, I remember. Miss Meredith passed. Major Despard went a heart. I passed. Dr. Roberts gave a jump bid of three clubs. Miss Meredith went three spades. Major Despard bid four diamonds. I doubled. Dr. Roberts took it into four hearts. They went down one.'
> '*Epatant*,' said Poirot. 'What a memory!' (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 11).

The order of the movements in the game gives him something to compare with the first inquiry of the suspects made by the sleuths who asked each suspect to describe their movements in the room Mr. Shaitana was murdered:

> 'Now, Mrs. Lorrimer, can you tell me how often you got up from your seat tonight, and will you also describe the movements of the other three?'
> Mrs. Lorrimer did not take any time to think.
> 'I thought you would probably ask me that. I have been trying to think it out. I got up once myself when I was dummy. I went over to the fire. Mr. Shaitana was alive then. I mentioned to him how nice it was to see a wood fire.'
> 'And he answered?'
> 'That he hated radiators.'
> 'Did anyone overhear your conversation?'

> ‘I don’t think so. I lowered my voice, not to interrupt the players.’ She added dryly: ‘In fact, you have only my word for it that Mr. Shaitana *was* alive and spoke to me’ (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 5, author emphasis added).

As the detectives comprehend the events and organize them in a timeline, starting from the first rubber until the discovery of the body, they perceive, as Hercule Poirot did, that the person who killed Shaitana was the dummy and did that when the other players were focused on the game. This probably happened during a Grand Slam, one of the most difficult biddings in bridge in which you have to win all thirteen tricks, which miraculously happened in their third rubber.

Another characteristic of the story of the investigation is related to the idea that characters cannot act in this sequence of events, but only learn the facts. *Cards on the Table* breaks this pre-established pattern as two out of the four suspects die, one is killed by the person who murdered Shaitana and the other while trying to murder again.

This break in the order, caused by another murder ruled out first as suicide and the attempt of murder that caused an accidental death, presumably happens because all suspects share the same characteristic of having committed murder before. This may have been a decision of the author to sustain the idea brought by Poirot in his meeting with Mr. Shaitana at the exhibition, that a murderer might murder again:

> ‘I am not as insensitive to art in crime as you think. I can admire the perfect murder—I can also admire a tiger—that splendid tawny-striped beast. But I will admire him from outside his cage. I will not go inside. That is to say, not unless it is my duty to do so. For you see, Mr. Shaitana, the tiger might spring…’
> Mr. Shaitana laughed.
> ‘I see. And the murderer?’
> ‘Might murder,’ said Poirot gravely (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 1).

By achieving an answer after observing and gathering evidence, most of them behavioural and circumstantial evidence, Poirot re-establishes the equilibrium disrupted by the crime portrayed in the first story as he reveals the identity of the murderer. In addition to it, he also adds that the presumed suicide was in fact another murder witnessed by a window cleaner.

As a result, from his last statement, the murderer, trying to deny the allegations saying he was trying to revive the victim, is confronted with the statement of the witness and finally admits to the crime. Nevertheless, the witness happens to be a promising young actor brought in by Poirot as a bait to get the tiger – the murderer – out of his cage.

This section approached the order of the narrative concerning some events narrated. The next section examines the space in the narrative frequented by characters.

4.3 The Space

For readers of detective novels, the description of the places visited by the characters during the story provides a set of mental pictures that helps on the construction of the crime scene. In addition to it, the description of the space allows the reader to walk through and experience the events narrated as he assumes the detective's character in the journey.

In Christie's (2016) novel, many places are described as the characters start to move in the secluded area where the crime occurs. As a new place is entered by one of the characters, a brief description of what caught the character's attention is usually made as shown in the excerpt below:

> Pinker than ever, Rhoda followed her. Along a passage, round a corner, a door was opened. Nervously she entered into what seemed at first to her startled eyes to be an African forest!
> Birds—masses of birds, parrots, macaws, birds unknown to ornithology, twined themselves in and out of what seemed to be a primeval forest. In the middle of this riot of bird and vegetable life, Rhoda perceived a battered kitchen table with a typewriter on it, masses of typescript littered all over the floor and Mrs. Oliver, her hair in wild confusion, rising from a somewhat rickety-looking chair (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 17).

What is of interest regarding the common space frequented by all of the main characters is the room in which the dead body of Mr. Shaitana was found. When Hercule Poirot visits the suspects to inquire them on the murder, he asks them two questions: he asks them to reconstruct the bridge game based on the score sheets and to describe the room they were in. From the description the suspects give of the room, Poirot detects evidence of their behavioural personality, which manifests the kind of mind each one of them has:

> 'There is so little in it. You think I conceal facts from you? It is not so. I have not learned many facts. I have talked with Dr. Roberts, with Mrs. Lorrimer, with Major Despard (I have still to talk to Miss Meredith) and what have I learnt? This! That Dr. Roberts is a keen observer, that Mrs. Lorrimer on the other hand has a most remarkable power of concentration but is, in consequence, almost blind to her surroundings. But she is fond of flowers. Despard notices only those things which appeal to him—rugs, trophies of sport. He has neither what I call the outward vision (seeing details all around you—what is called an

> observant person) nor the inner vision—concentration, the focusing of the mind on one object. He has a purposefully limited vision. He sees only what blends and harmonizes with the bent of his mind' (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 19).

The psychological approach Poirot gives to the characterization of the space evidence, in which he does not overlook the minimal details, is often discarded, or considered irrelevant to the investigators whose methods do not entail an observation analysis of the information gathered.

Besides, for readers, the description of the incidents from the past of the suspects and the locations frequented more than once in the narrative help them in keeping track of characters' motion inside the fictional world, thus creating themselves a spatial chronology which becomes helpful in analysing the evidence and getting to the answer of the *whodunnit*.

This section discussed the space inhabited by characters in the book. The following section studies the characters and their roles in the book's narrative.

4.4 The Characters

Characters, in the narrative structure of detective fiction, are the ones who give life to the story as they act the roles given by the author and inhabit the fictional space created. In Christie's book, they play a fundamental role due to the narrative experiment in which the only way to find the culprit is using psychological analysis as the method to approach the evidence.

The characteristics portrayed by each entity in the book are based on the human nature. That is, they have human-like aspects such as physical and intellectual ones, thus approximating the reader to the narrative. As a consequence of this characterization, the interpretation of their actions in the sequence of events of the book becomes complex.

The victim is described as having peculiar preferences related to crime and a diabolical appearance. Shaitana's character is a threaten to the murderers as he pokes them by inflicting, suggestively, that he knows secrets about their crimes. Enraged by the host's comment, this eventually becomes the trigger for one of them to murder him with the means at hand:

> Mr. Shaitana laughed gently.
> 'Poison is a woman's weapon,' he said. 'There must be many secret women poisoners—never found out.'

> ‘Of course there are,’ said Mrs. Oliver happily, helping herself lavishly to a *mousse* of *foie gras*.
> ‘A doctor, too, has opportunities,’ went on Mr. Shaitana thoughtfully.
> ‘I protest,’ cried Dr. Roberts. ‘When we poison our patients it’s entirely by accident.’ He laughed heartily.
> ‘But if I were to commit a crime,’ went on Mr. Shaitana.
> He stopped, and something in that pause compelled attention.
> All faces were turned to him.
> ‘I should make it very simple, I think. There’s always an accident—a shooting accident, for instance—or the domestic kind of accident.’
> Then he shrugged his shoulders and picked up his wineglass.
> ‘But who am I to pronounce—with so many experts present...’ (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 2, author emphasis added).

Coming from different backgrounds, the sleuths who investigate the murder are characterized by their distinct approaches to solve crimes. Together, they try to untangle the knots – the hidden evidence – from the past of each suspect to get to the one tangled up by Shaitana’s murder. They represent the force who tries to restore the equilibrium disarrayed in the crime and afford a plausible answer for the *whodunnit* to the reader of the story.

Hercule Poirot, as the main detective in *Cards on the Table*, is the only one who can give the right answer due to the fact that his method, in which every suspect is a criminal is the most suitable one to solve a crime. As the mind of a murderer who has already committed murder at least once, prior to the murder of Mr. Shaitana, works differently from the other murders investigated by Poirot, he has to observe the evidence using his little grey cells.

Focusing on the suspects, they all represent a threat to the other characters because of their criminal record. Murder was committed by each one of them for different reasons, and this is what shapes their distinctive features. While one commits murder for pleasure, another commits for greed, and this is the only complexity involving the analysis Poirot does.

What is of interest about the suspects is how Poirot finds crucial evidence about them based on his observation of the bridge scores:

> […] ‘What’s the idea of the bridge scores, M. Poirot?’
> Poirot spread them on the table.
> ‘They are illuminating, do you not think? What do we want in this case? A clue to character. And a clue not to one character, but to four characters. And this is where we are most likely to find it—in these scribbled figures. Here is the first rubber, you see—a tame business, soon over. Small neat figures—careful addition and subtraction—that is Miss Meredith’s score. She was playing with Mrs. Lorrimer. They had the cards, and they won.’
> ‘In this next one it is not so easy to follow the play, since it is kept in the cancellation style. But it tells us perhaps something about Major Despard—a

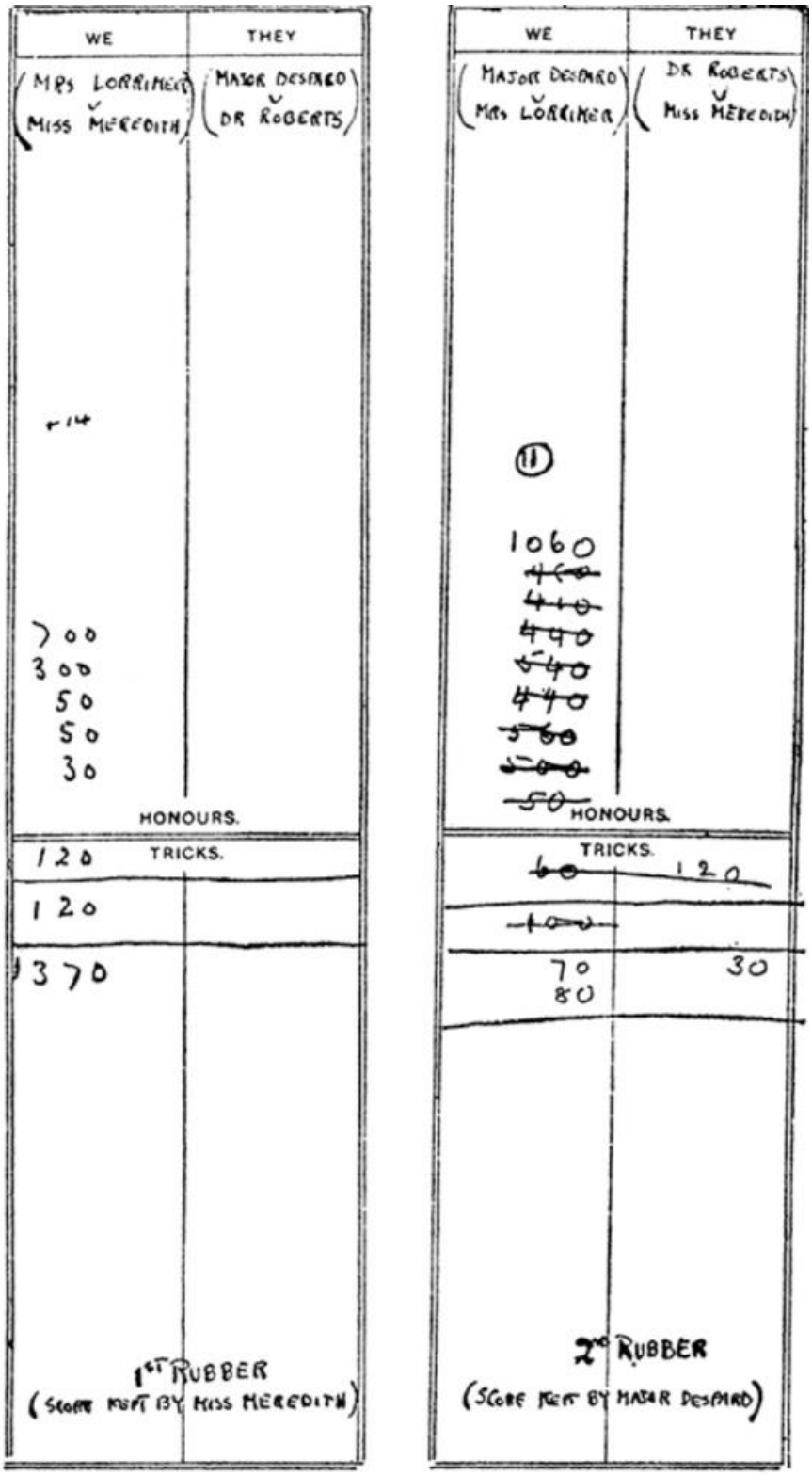
man who likes the whole time to know at a glance where he stands. The figures are small and full of character.'

'This next score is Mrs. Lorrimer's—she and Dr. Roberts against the other two—a Homeric combat—figures mounting up above the line each side. Overcalling on the doctor's part, and they go down; but, since they are both first-class players, they never go down very much. If the doctor's overcalling induces rash bidding on the other side there is the chance seized of doubling. See—these figures here are doubled tricks gone down. A characteristic handwriting, graceful, very legible, firm.'

'Here is the last score—the unfinished rubber. I collected one score in each person's handwriting, you see. Figures rather flamboyant. Not such high scores as the preceding rubber. That is probably because the doctor was playing with Miss Meredith, and she is a timid player. His calling would make her more so!

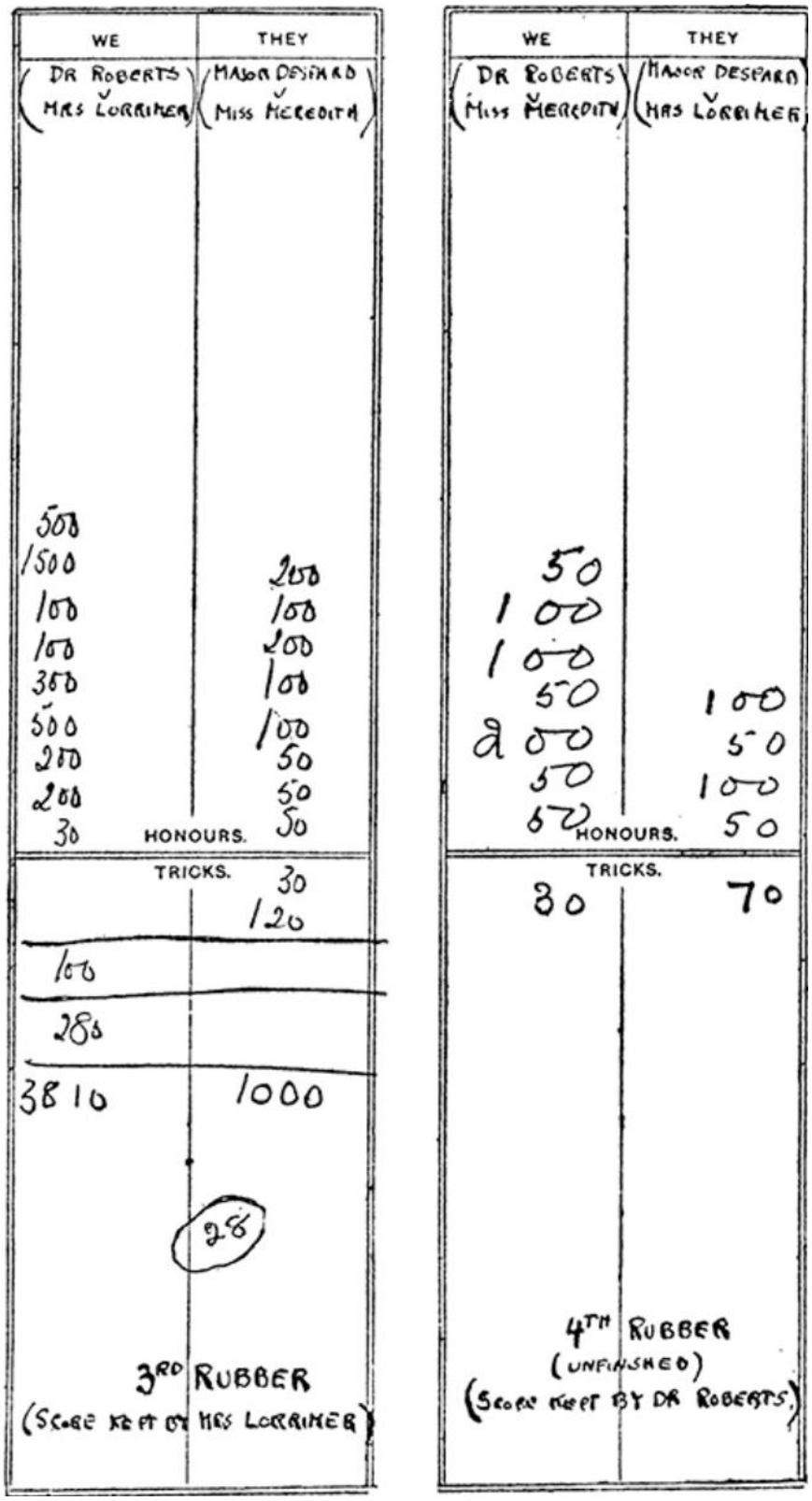
'You think, perhaps, that they are foolish, these questions that I ask? But it is not so. I want to get at the characters of these four players, and when it is only about bridge I ask, everyone is ready and willing to speak' (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 6).

Figure 1 – Bridge Scores (First and Second Rubbers)



Source: Christie (2016, ch. 6)

Figure 2 – Bridge Scores (Third and Fourth Rubbers)



Source: Christie (2016, ch. 6)

As Hercule Poirot discloses his perception on the bridge scores and what they say about each suspect, he states that the other sleuths might not understand why he is only asking about bridge. He argues that his technique of asking irrelevant questions is what caught the suspects off guard, revealing more about their behaviours than they think.

After his first interrogation, he discloses his first observation of the psychological state of each one of them:

> ‘What’s your idea of the right line to take, M. Poirot? That’s one question. And I’d also like to know what you think of the psychology of these four people. You’re rather hot on that.’
> Still smoothing his bridge scores, Poirot said:
> ‘You are right—psychology is very important. We know the kind of murder that has been committed, the way it was committed. If we have a person who from the psychological point of view could not have committed that particular type of murder, then we can dismiss that person from our calculations. We know something about these people. We have our own impression of them, we know the line that each has elected to take, and we know something about their minds and their characters from what we have learned about them as card players and from the study of their handwriting and of these scores. But alas! it is not too easy to give a definite pronouncement. This murder required audacity and nerve—a person who was willing to take a risk. Well, we have Dr. Roberts—a bluffer—an overcaller of his hand—a man with complete confidence in his own powers to pull off a risky thing. His psychology fits very well with the crime. One might say, then, that that automatically wipes out Miss Meredith. She is timid, frightened of overcalling her hand, careful, economical, prudent and lacking in self-confidence. The last type of person to carry out a bold and risky coup. But a timid person will murder out of fear. A frightened nervous person can be made desperate, can turn like a rat at bay if driven into a corner. If Miss Meredith had committed a crime in the past, and if she believed that Mr. Shaitana knew the circumstances of that crime and was about to deliver her up to justice she would be wild with terror—she would stick at nothing to save herself. It would be the same result, though brought about through a different reaction—not cool nerve and daring, but desperate panic. Then take Major Despard—a cool, resourceful man willing to try a long shot if he believed it absolutely necessary. He would weigh the pros and cons and might decide that there was a sporting chance in his favour— and he is the type of man to prefer action to inaction, and a man who would never shrink from taking the dangerous way if he believed there was a reasonable chance of success. Finally, there is Mrs. Lorrimer, an elderly woman, but a woman in full possession of her wits and faculties. A cool woman. A woman with a mathematical brain. She has probably the best brain of the four. I confess that if Mrs. Lorrimer committed a crime, I should expect it to be a premeditated crime. I can see her planning a crime slowly and carefully, making sure that there were no flaws in her scheme. For that reason she seems to me slightly more unlikely than the other three. She is, however, the most dominating personality, and whatever she undertook she would probably carry through without a flaw. She is a thoroughly efficient woman’ (CHRISTIE, 2016, c. 8).

However, even if Poirot provides a psychological evaluation for each one of the suspects, this is not enough evidence to point out which one of them killed Mr.

Shaitana. For this reason, he expresses the need of going into their pasts to find the identity of the real culprit.

In addition to it, the characters of *Cards on the Table* experience another element related to the order and the space in the narrative. As mentioned in the section about order, characters do not act throughout the investigation's story, but they exceptionally do so in the narrative created by Agatha Christie. The controlling characteristic of the space and the attributes given to the suspects as murderers makes action necessary, thus corroborating Margolin's (2007, ch. 5) statement:

> Since characters are shaped by their authors to attain certain ends and effects, it makes perfect sense to inquire why and to what end they endowed their characters with this particular selection of features.

This section analysed the characters in *Cards on the* Table as important elements for the discovery of the *whodunnit*. The next section analyses the idea of fair play in Christie's (2016) novel.

4.5 Christie's Fair Play in *Cards on the Table*

As the reader plays a game performing the role of the detective, he, theoretically, should obtain the same information as the investigator to solve the crime. This concern is the basis of the rules of fair play, created with the aim of conducting the novels written towards the end of the Golden Age in which some authors, such as Agatha Christie, did not abide to some of these rules in their works.

Cards on the Table breaks the fair play even before the story starts, as the book has a foreword explaining the intention of the narrative to the readers. This first statement intrinsically confirms the rules were broken when it mentions that the only way to catch the culprit is psychologically approaching the evidence. For this reason, the book contravenes point number 6 of fair play, summarized by Todorov (1977), in which states that the use of psychological and describing techniques are not allowed. Not only the voice of the foreword, but one of the sleuths in the book criticizes the method followed by Poirot:

> 'It's an odd method of approach,' said Battle thoughtfully. 'Purely psychological. Suppose they're leading you up the garden path?'
> Poirot shook his head with a smile.
> 'No, that would be impossible. Whether they try to hinder or to help, they necessarily reveal their *type of mind*.'

> ‘There’s something in it, no doubt,’ said Battle thoughtfully. ‘I couldn’t work that way myself, though’ (CHRISTIE, 2016, ch. 19, author emphasis added).

Another rule Christie breaks is point number 7, which reinforces the concept behind fair play, in which a parallel is created to exemplify how the information of the book must be divided. When Tzvetan Todorov (1977) summarized this point, he indicated that the information the detective has access to has to be the same information provided to the reader, following the same pattern regarding the relationship between author and criminal. That is, what the criminal knows the author must know as he is the one who created the criminal, thus the clues the detective collects have to be the same ones the reader gathers. This correlation leads to two other aspects present in the story: the “red-herrings” and the bridge game.

The first aspect is the false clues or “red-herrings”, commonly found in the narrative because of the use of psychology as a method to solve the crime. In this case, as evidence emerges, readers adopt a perspective, sometimes different from the detective’s, to read the information given and make guesses based on their conclusions. As the detection is grounded in analysing the behaviour of the suspects, it becomes almost impossible to be certain of what is true and what is false, thus requiring the use of probability as a mean to arrive to the right answer.

The second aspect, connected to the use of “red-herrings”, is the bridge game. As a card game is coincidently based on probability, the reader indirectly has the information he needs to comprehend not only the game played by the suspects, but also the evidence that emerges during the investigation of their past through probability. For this reason, readers who are not acquainted with bridge and its structure, as well as the strategies they can apply when playing, are in disadvantage in relation to those who are familiar with it.

In regard to this idea of fair play, Owen (1997, ch. 7) says that the infringement of the rules can make the detective provide the readers with a more suitable answer for the *whodunnit* than the resolution they usually achieve:

> As part of the ‘game rule’ structure, this narrator must in fairness reveal everything he knows in order for readers to arrive at a solution on their own; however, the narrator's understanding, hence the reader's, must always be limited to comparison to the detective's. Therefore, from an aficionado's standpoint, a ‘proper’ detective story consists of the detective arriving at the solution before the reader with a greater understanding than the reader could have had.

Consequently, by choosing to break the rules, Agatha Christie started another branch deriving from the “clue-puzzle” fiction, thus creating a masterpiece only she could write.

The next chapter addresses the final remarks of this research in which the analysis of the narrative structure and Christie’s fair play in *Cards on the Table* are reviewed.

5 CONCLUSION

This final thesis had as its aim to conduct a structural analysis on the narrative of the book *Cards on the Table*, written by Agatha Christie, through the perspective of Tzvetan Todorov's (1977) *The Typology of Detective Fiction*, about the structure of this fiction and the notion of fair play. As he discusses genre and typology as a mean of classification, he states that "unfortunately for logic, genres are not constituted in conformity with structural descriptions […]" as the presence of a new element originates another genre (TODOROV, 1977, pp. 47-48). Starting from this remark and from Todorov's (1969, pp. 70-71) idea that structural analysis "[…] present a spectrum of literary possibilities, in such a manner that the existing works of literature appear as particular instances that have been realized", the object of this research was examined.

The theoretical background of detective fiction supporting this research was mainly based on the works of Todorov (1977), Malmgren (1997), Knight (1980, 2003, 2004), Scaggs (2005), Merrill (1997), Woods (1997), Ackershoek (1997), Prchal (1997), and Hark (1997), starting from discussions on the crime fiction genre, the figure of the detective focusing on Hercule Poirot, the Golden Age, the rules of fair play, and Agatha Christie. For the narrative structure of this kind of fiction, the works of Genette (1980), Bridgeman (2007), Margolin (2007), Pyrhönen (2007), and Cobley (2014) provided insight on the discussion on genre, order, space, characters, and the role of the reader in Christie's stories. Also, a chapter focused on contextualizing *Cards on the Table* (2016) was written to display Christie's foreword, the characteristics of the characters, the card game played by them, and what happens in the story of the crime and in the story of the investigation, by giving a glimpse on the events occurring in the narrative.

Then, the structural analysis was done to discuss aspects of the narrative structure of detective fiction in relation to the book, addressing the genre, the order, the space, and the characters. The notion of fair play was also analysed as the rules are based on features present in the structure of detective fiction.

In regard to the discussion on genre, the book may represent a starting point for another genre, thus following Todorov's (1977) statement that a great book comes from two genres, the one exceeded and the one created. As Christie did not play by the rules of fair play, she adopted a new perspective and turned them into a reference material, turning valid what Scaggs (2005) pointed out, that the ever-changing

characteristic of detective fiction has the ability of adapting to different conditions and acquiring new aspects, resulting in a *sui generis* work.

As to the order, the book written by Christie does, but at the same time does not follow Todorov's perspective of the two stories. The author used this orderly feature to conduct her story and shaped it according to her aims, thus experimenting new characteristics which may or may not be appreciated by her readers. Furthermore, "the detective story reader, as aware as the author is of the standard formulas of detective fiction, demands innovation, which ultimately subverts such formulas" (OWEN, 1997, ch. 7).

Space in narrative functions as a basis feature, as characters inhabit the places that are part of the book's realm. For *Cards on the Table*, the locations created by Christie shape readers' perspective of the events narrated as they are in places the author wants them to be at a specific moment while observing characters' interactions and their envisions about it. To readers, the space created allows them to go on a journey of imagining themselves as the characters, thus living the story in their shoes (BRIDGEMAN, 2007).

Because of the unique and intriguing depiction of characters in the book, readers experience assorted emotions based on the perspective they adopt of each character, just as they interpret the evidence and point out their guesses on the *whodunnit*. As Teresa Bridgeman (2007, ch. 4) writes: "as readers, we, too, may adopt a perspective suggested by the text and this will affect our attitude towards the world". In addition to it, they are the ones who give life to the narrative experiment conducted by Christie and make it remarkable.

As said in the conclusions about the genre, the narrative lacks fairness due to Agatha Christie's preference to use the rules as a reference to write her stories. The rules deliberately broken in *Cards on the Table* are the ones concerning the use of psychological technique to solve the crime and the principal fundament of all rules. They state the evidence must be equally given to the detective and the reader, not allowing one of them to be in advantage in relation to the other. Despite this, Kathleen B. Owen's (1997) arguments on the violation of the rules justify that, even by sharing the same information, only the detective is capable of giving an answer which conforms to all the evidence.

Therefore, after this analysis, it is concluded that *Cards on the Table* is indeed a masterpiece created by Agatha Christie. It is a mystery written as a narrative

experiment which originated the story solely Christie could write and a crime that only Hercule Poirot could solve. This singularity makes readers face the unexpected while reading, as they encounter elements that are not commonly present in a Poirot novel. Hence, it is evident that the book does not follow points 6 and 7 of the rules of fair play, summarized by Todorov (1977), as the author forewarned the only way to approach the evidence of the story and attributed in its structure elements which are not found in this kind of fiction.

Concerning the approach used to analyse the book and the reached conclusions, Todorov's (1969) view on what a structural analysis fosters is what justifies the study here presented. Nevertheless, this study encourages other approaches, as Todorov writes that "the critic's work can have varying degrees of subjectivity; everything depends on the perspective he has chosen" (TODOROV, 1969, p. 72).

Therefore, further research is suggested on *Cards on the Table* narrative structure based on the authors previously mentioned, such as Todorov (1977) and Genette (1980), whose studies approach other structural elements which are considered worthwhile being investigated. Moreover, the narrative created by Christie is also worth of a psychological approach because Poirot used psychology to solve the crime; thus, by analysing this novel through the psychological approach a researcher might contribute to the understanding of the techniques this great detective applied to solve this crime.

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