

The Murder at the Vicarage 1930

[N.B. This review contains PLOT SPOILERS for this novel, but not for other novels]

‘What class of brain really succeeds best in unravelling a mystery?’ asks Raymond West in Christie’s short story *The Tuesday Night Club*. This story, first published in the *The Royal Magazine* in 1927, is Miss Marple’s debut. Three years and several short stories later Miss Marple makes her first appearance in a novel: *The Murder at the Vicarage*. The Vicar, who narrates the novel, gives his answer to Raymond West’s question. ‘There is no detective in England’ he says, ‘equal to a spinster lady of uncertain age with plenty of time on her hands.’ Griselda, the vicar’s young wife, says of Miss Marple: ‘.. she always knows every single thing that happens – and draws the worst inferences from it.’ The vicar, somewhat ruefully remarks to the reader: ‘At my time of life, one knows that the worst is usually true.’

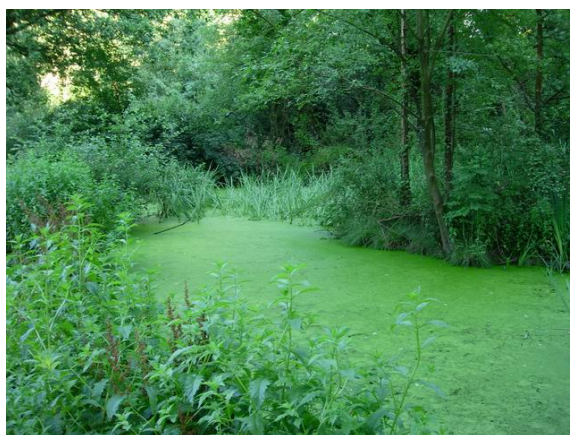


Miss Marple, the first picture, by Gilbert Wilkinson, as it appeared in *The Royal Magazine*
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Miss_Marple_First_Image.jpg]

Miss Marple displays many characteristics of the classic detective. ‘I always find it prudent to suspect everybody just a little.’ she says to Lawrence Redding; and to the vicar: ‘The point is that one must provide an explanation for everything. Each thing has got to be explained away satisfactorily. If you have a theory that fits every fact – well, then, it must be the right one.’ And when, a little later, the vicar says: ‘That would mean looking at the case from an entirely different angle’, Miss Marple replies: ‘One so often has to do that – about everything. Don’t you think so?’ And like Poirot she can be irritatingly complacent. When the chief constable says: ‘but they are the only two people with a motive for making away with Protheroe’ Miss Marple replies: ‘Oh, I wouldn’t say that ... Why ... I can think of at least seven people who might be very glad to have Colonel Protheroe out of the way.’

Miss Marple, however, is not simply Hercule Poirot in drag. Central to her character and way of thinking is the idea of the village. St Mary Mead is integral to her personality and to her approach in solving mysteries. In *The Tuesday Night Club*

Joyce Lemprière, an artist, says: 'I know life as darling Miss Marple here cannot possibly know it'. Miss Marple replies: 'I don't know about that, dear. Very painful and distressing things happen in villages sometimes'. In *Vicarage* Miss Marple summarises her credo: 'Life is, after all, very much the same everywhere.' Her nephew, Raymond West, responds: 'I regard St Mary Mead as a stagnant pool.' 'That is really not a very good simile, dear Raymond' replies Miss Marple, 'Nothing, I believe, is so full of life under the microscope as a drop of water from a stagnant pool.' The village is the stagnant pool full of life, and Miss Marple the microscopist.



A stagnant pond: metaphor for village life
[photo by: Hugh Venables: <http://hughvenables.blogspot.co.uk/>]

For Miss Marple, whether a mystery is trivial and everyday, such as missing shrimps, or major, such as murder, makes little difference to how it can be solved. Both will be understood in terms of human motivation and character. Logically, Miss Marple argues, solving both types of mystery ought to be exactly the same thing. 'After all' she says, 'a tiny working model of a torpedo is just the same as a real torpedo'.

So, how should these human mysteries be solved? For Poirot, although he often ridicules detectives who look for tiny physical clues, such clues, in the early novels, often play a significant role in the solving of mysteries. Miss Marple, however, shows little interest in such activity. Instead she spends time in her garden, watching people. Miss Marple behaves more consistently than Poirot – more as Poirot advocates than of how he behaves. Poirot speaks of the importance of 'psychology', Miss Marple of 'human nature'. There is a difference. Poirot is interested in the psychology of a particular person, of why a person says something or acts in a particular way. Miss Marple proceeds by analogy and classification.

'No nice girl would ... be a secretary to an unmarried man' says Miss Wetherby – another of the elderly village spinsters. 'Oh! my dear', said Miss Marple, 'I think married ones are the worst. Remember poor Mollie Carter'. After the murder of Colonel Protheroe, Griselda, the vicar's wife, says: 'I wish you'd solve the case, Miss Marple like you did the time Miss Wetherby's gill of picked shrimps disappeared. And all because it reminded you of something quite different about a sack of coals.' Miss Marple responds: ' ... that is a very sound way of arriving at the truth. It's really what people call intuition and make such a fuss about. Intuition is like reading a

word without having to spell it out. A child can't do that because it has had so little experience. But a grown-up person knows the word because they've seen it often before.' And when asked what the murder of Colonel Protheroe reminds her of, Miss Marple says: 'That is just the difficulty. So many parallels come to mind. For instance, there was Major Hargreaves And then there was Miss Hartnell's opal pin – left most imprudently in a frilled blouse and sent to the laundry. ... And then there was poor Elwell's daughter – such a pretty ethereal girl – tried to stifle her little brother. And there was the money for the Choir Boys' Outing.'

Miss Marple uses not only analogy but also classification. In chapter 26 she says: ' .. my hobby is ... Human Nature. ... And, of course, in a small village ... one has such ample opportunity for becoming ... proficient One begins to class people .. just as though they were birds or flowers, group so-and-so, genus this, species that. ...'



"a tiny working model of a torpedo is just the same as a real torpedo"
[<http://store02.prostores.com/servlet/artplanes/the-154/MK-dsh-24-Mark-24-Tigerfish/Detail>]

Perhaps because of the significance for Miss Marple of human stories there are more sub-plots and red-herrings in *Vicarage* than in any of Christie's previous novels.

There are five main parallel plots.

1. Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe are on (or perhaps over) the brink of having an affair. We learn of this early on when the vicar discovers them *in flagrante delicto* of an embrace. This provides the motive for one or other or both of them murdering Anne's husband, Colonel Protheroe.

2. Dr Stone, an archaeologist, and his short-skirted helper, Miss Cramm, are excavating a site on Colonel Protheroe's property. It turns out that Dr Stone is an imposter and is a robber who intends to steal some valuable items from Colonel Protheroe.

3. Mrs Lestrangle, who has recently come to live in the village, is a mysterious figure throughout most of the novel. Haydock, the village doctor, seems to know her from the past and is meeting with her secretly. Dr Haydock also knew Colonel Protheroe from before either of them had moved to St Mary Mead. It turns out that Mrs Lestrangle is Colonel Protheroe's first wife and mother of Lettice. She is now dying from a fatal disease. She has come to live at St Mary Mead to be near her daughter although Colonel Protheroe is attempting to prevent her from seeing Lettice.

4. Hawes, the curate, has been embezzling church funds. Colonel Protheroe who is church warden knows this and is murdered just as he is about to inform the vicar about Hawes' embezzling.

5. Archer, a young poacher has been sentenced to prison on several occasions by Protheroe who is a local magistrate. He has sworn vengeance against Protheroe. He has been 'walking out' with the vicar's maid, Mary, for two years. Mary was the only person, other than the murderer and victim, in the vicarage when the murder was committed. Colonel Protheroe was shot with Lawrence Redding's gun which Lawrence kept at his house. Archer's mother does the cleaning at Redding's house.

In addition to these plots and sub-plots, there are hints at possible motives for others to be involved in the murder plot: Griselda, the vicar's wife, for example.

With so many plots and secrets, the stagnant pool that is St Mary Mead is teeming with life. The large number of plots has two positive dramatic effects on the story as a whole. First it allows for plot twists: for example Hawes is about to be arrested for the murder just before the real solution is revealed. Second it enables the author to 'beat' the reader. Given the possibility of several solutions the reader is likely to hit on the wrong one. But there is one very significant problem: the actual solution may be arbitrary. The reader might well reasonably think that his solution is just as good as the true solution, perhaps better.

A whodunnit writer must try and tread that difficult path between the true solution being too obvious on the one hand or it being arbitrary on the other hand. Christie is one of the few authors who achieves this again and again, but not in *Vicarage*.

The problem lies with Miss Marple's fundamental philosophy. As we have seen, she believes that if you have a theory that fits all the facts it must be the right one. But this is no more true of detective work than it is of science. If a theory accounts for all the known facts it might be the correct theory but it is not necessarily so. There may be one or more different theories that also account for the facts.

When Miss Marple presents her solution and reconstruction of the crime to the vicar and chief constable they are so convinced that they conclude that it is the only possible solution. But they are wrong. I will give one alternative. In my version the murderer is Lettice Protheroe, daughter of the victim. The evidence in favour is as follows.

1. Motive: Lettice will inherit a large fortune on the death of her father. In addition Lettice had an argument with her father over the painting of her portrait by Lawrence Redding. Indeed Lettice may be wanting to marry Redding - and this might be either reciprocated or not. If it is reciprocated this might account for why Redding allowed himself to be found in a compromising position with Anne Protheroe - to allay any suspicion that he and Lettice are in fact lovers.

2. Character: we are told several times that Lettice, despite her pretence of being rather vague is actually a very sharp and intelligent young woman.
3. Behaviour: we find out that Lettice, shortly after the murder, is very worried about something.
4. Mechanism: at first it seems that Lettice has an alibi for the time of the crime. She was some way from the village playing tennis. She claimed to have left the tennis game at 7.30 pm – an hour after the time of the murder. But we learn that she left the tennis game early and stopped Dennis (her tennis partner) from leaving with her. Then we learn that a tennis racket was dropped on the grass not far from the vicarage where the murder was committed. We also learn that as long as Mrs Price Ridley did not come out of her house at the crucial moment, it would have been possible for the murderer to have entered the vicarage by the front door unseen.
5. Supporting evidence: in order to ensure that the vicar was not at the vicarage at the time of the murder he received a phone call asking him to urgently visit a parishioner. This call, we learn, was made from the Old Hall which is where Lettice lives and so she would have had easy access and would also have known that there would be no-one around at the time.
6. We learn at the end (after the correct solution has been revealed) that Lettice was indeed in the village, quite close to the vicarage, around the time of the murder.

The real solution requires one coincidence (Miss Marple, and presumably Christie, think one coincidence is acceptable). That coincidence is that a phone call to Mrs Price Ridley close to the time of the murder had nothing to do with the murder. On my theory this is not a coincidence. Lettice arranged for the vicar's nephew, Dennis, who she can wind round her little finger, to make the call to ensure that Mrs Ridley would be on the phone and not be able to see Lettice entering the vicarage at the crucial time.

A case might also be made for other murderers: Mrs Lestrangle, Griselda, or even Dr Haydock.

The murder of Colonel Protheroe is the first murder for a long time in the quiet sleepy village of St Mary Mead. But now that Miss Marple has found her metier – solving important crimes and not simply village puzzles – the body count in and around St Mary Mead will begin to rise. It makes one wonder. A successful murderer might try again. Look again at the map in chapter 3. Miss Marple's house abuts the vicarage. Who else was keeping watch and knew when the coast was clear? And as for motive? Why, yes. I can think of, oh, at least seven possibilities.



St Andrew's Church, Nether Wallop, Hampshire: the village used as the location for St Mary Mead by the BBC
[http://www.astoft.co.uk/nether_wallop.htm]