

## Five Little Pigs

1943

[This contains plot spoilers for this novel but no other]

This is an exceptional novel. There are three completely separate ways to analyse the plot:



The Battery at Greenway; where Amyas Crale was painting

### 1]Nursery Rhyme theme.

This follows on from the success of *And Then There Were None* [1939], when Christie used a nursery rhyme as the skeleton structure of the book. In *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe* 1940, the nursery rhyme title was almost irrelevant to the plot. With *Five Little Pigs*, Christie reverted to a closely structured transposition of the Five Little Pigs rhyme, into the main characters of the book.

Philip Blake, the little pig that goes to market, is a financial broker who successfully plays the stock market, and has 'run to fat'.

Blake's brother, Meredith is the little pig who 'stays at home': the Squire of Handcross Manor, he does not have to earn a living as his estate supports him. His domestic hobby is plant science and the distillations of lethal botanics. He lives quietly in the beautiful Devonshire countryside.

The little pig who ate 'Roast Beef' is Elsa Greer, now Lady Dittisham living in the lap of luxury in Brook Street, London.

In stark contrast, the pig that 'has none' is Miss Williams, Angela's staunch Victorian governess eking out a meagre existence in retirement. Miss Williams' domain is a one room flat, with a threadbare carpet. Miss Williams never complains, is content and fulfilled, quite unlike Lady Dittisham.

The most contrived little pig going 'wee, wee, wee all the way home' is Angela Warren with her physical disabilities of a blinded eye and scarred face, although neither has stopped her being a very successful, happy archaeologist. She has no self-pity.



A portrait of Miss Agatha Miller: in the Christie home, Greenway, cared for by the National Trust

## 2] Psychological Plot theme

The second way to understand this book is to see it as an interesting plot progression from, *Sad Cypress* [1940]. Christie explored the concepts of both experiencing and expiating guilt by taking the thought experiment still further. In *Sad Cypress* Elinor Carlisle is being tried for murder and does not fight for her life. The police believe she is guilty with motive, means and opportunity. Elinor *feels* guilty because she wished Mary dead. When Mary *is* found dead, Elinor feels she is to blame. The essence of *Sad Cypress* is the crucial difference between thought and action.

In this next book, Christie extends this theme to another woman, Caroline Crale, who *is* found guilty of murdering her husband, Amyas, a famous painter. Mrs Crale is not hanged, but died in prison. Caroline, just like Elinor in *Sad Cypress*, never fought for her life in the dock. The counsel for the prosecution described Mrs. Crale's trial as 'shooting the sitting bird': she never had a sporting chance. We do not have Mrs.

Crale's thoughts, as she died fifteen years before this book begins. The reader knows that Caroline Crale lived with the guilt of having disfigured her little half-sister's face, when they were both children. Many observers commented that the verdict 'was a relief' to Mrs Crale: and she wrote to Angela, her half-sister: 'It's all all right, it's all right, it's all right'.

The counsels for the prosecution and the defence, the Chief Inspector of Police, and four out of five of the 'little pigs' were absolutely certain Caroline was guilty. When Mrs. Crale was asked on oath if she had poisoned Amyas, she replied: 'Oh no – no I didn't'.

Caroline Crale wrote a deathbed letter to be delivered to her daughter, Carla, when 21 years old assuring her that she did *not* poison Amyas. Carla and Angela, are confident that Caroline Crale would not have lied in court. Poirot's seemingly impossible task is to prove her innocence, and gain a posthumous pardon for Mrs. Crale. This is 16 years after the crime was committed, 15 years after Caroline's own death.

Mrs. Crale, like Elinor Carlisle in *Sad Cypress*, had motive, means and opportunity. All the characters knew that Amyas was leaving his wife and 5-year-old daughter for a young, sexy siren, the 20-year-old Elsa Greer. People heard Caroline say to Amyas 'Some day I will kill you'. Caroline admitted stealing the hemlock from Meredith's laboratory, when they were all there for tea, the day before Amyas's death. Caroline emptied out her perfume bottle, replacing it with hemlock. Only her fingerprints are on her perfume bottle. Witnesses saw Caroline Crale take an iced beer down to Amyas in the Battery Garden while he painted Elsa that morning, pouring the drink out for him. He was dead by lunchtime: the hemlock in his beer glass. How could she be innocent? All the little pigs agree Amyas was not the sort of man to commit suicide.

Yet the clues to Caroline's innocence are there. Why would Caroline write to Angela saying 'Its all all right..I am happy...I feel an essential rightness and a peace that I have never known before'. This is an echo of Sydney Carton's self-sacrifice in *A Tale of Two Cities* 'It's a far, far better rest that I go to than I have ever known'. Christie knew her Dickens; she also *mentions A Tale of Two Cities* directly in *They Came to Baghdad* [1951]. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, Sydney Carton willingly goes to the guillotine in place of another man, whom he physically resembles, for the happiness of the woman they both love. One explanation for why Caroline wrote the letter could be that Angela already knew Caroline was innocent, but Angela required Caroline's assurance that Caroline was happy to take the blame. Why? The only explanation is that Angela killed Amyas. Angela was only 15 years old at the time of the murder. We know that Angela liked playing tricks on Amyas when they had argued. Angela had put slugs in his bed, and an emetic in his drink previously. The fateful day when they had all gone to tea with Meredith and talked about hemlock and the death of Socrates, Angela had found out from Elsa herself that Amyas intended to leave them, and run off with Elsa. Angela and Amyas had a terrible row that evening, culminating in Angela 'wishing he were dead', before rushing out to cry herself to sleep. The next

morning early Angela swam across to Handcross Manor, broke into Meredith's laboratory via the carelessly open sash window, and stole valerian to put in Amyas's beer. Angela was unscrewing the bottle top when Caroline came to collect a cold beer for Amyas. Caroline and Miss Williams have both seen Angela tampering with the beer, and Miss Williams comments Angela looks red faced and 'rather guilty'. It is this beer Caroline poured out for Amyas. When Amyas was found dead after lunch, Miss Williams saw Caroline feverishly wiping Angela's prints off the beer bottle, but misinterprets this action as admission of Caroline's guilt. As Poirot points out, the hemlock was in the glass, not the bottle. This is the clue upon which the case retrospectively hinges. Had Angela poisoned Amyas, the hemlock dregs would be *in the bottle*. If Caroline had poisoned Amyas, she would have *known* the hemlock was in the glass, not the bottle, and not worried about the fingerprints on the beer bottle. Because Caroline believes Angela has killed Amyas, and is willing to be hanged to save her sister, her own innocence is proven.

The Dart Estuary which Angela swam across to break into Handcross Manor



Caroline or Elsa could have put the hemlock in the glass, but you find out that Amyas's obsession with Elsa was waning now his masterpiece was nearly completed, and he will 'send her packing' once the canvas is finished. Unfortunately for Amyas, Elsa overheard this. Caroline has no motive for killing Amyas; they have kissed and made up. Their married life was a continual series of 'cat and dog' fights, but Caroline had always accepted her husband's constant infidelities as part of being married to this exceptional artist. Caroline said to Amyas 'you and your women'.

Caroline refused Angela's request to visit her in prison, and insisted that Angela was sent out of the country before the trial. Caroline must have been terrified that Angela would blurt out a confession. This was Caroline's way of expiating the guilt for her own childhood outburst of rage, throwing the paperweight that did leave a scar for life, both externally on Angela and internally on herself.

There are clues that Amyas must have been poisoned *before* drinking the iced beer that Caroline brought him. He says 'everything tastes foul today', as he drinks the Angela/Caroline bottle. This implies that a beer before this 'tasted foul' so might have had the bitter hemlock in it. The beers he drank before this iced bottle were kept at the Battery Garden where only he and Elsa were that morning. Meredith's account says he overheard Amyas saying he would see to 'her packing', thinking he was hearing Amyas talk of Angela going to boarding school, when it was actually dismissing Elsa from the house. From the testimony of Philip Blake we know Amyas 'staggered a bit' earlier that last morning before he drank the iced beer: a sign that the hemlock was already at work, so the poison must have been in the warm Battery

beer. Meredith corroborates this by observing that Amyas complains of being 'stiff all over – muscular rheumatism' immediately after Caroline brought the iced beer. This was too soon for hemlock to act if it had just been drunk: Meredith previously said hemlock took several hours to take effect.

Elsa heard the row between Caroline and Amyas through the open library window, and realised she was going to be sent 'packing'. Elsa had also witnessed Caroline stealing the hemlock from Meredith's laboratory the day before, when Caroline was contemplating suicide. Caroline said to Angela that Elsa would 'only marry Amyas after I'm dead'. Elsa ran back into the house on the pretext of needing a jumper, even though we have been told it was a very hot day, in order to find the hemlock she knew was hidden in Caroline's room, to seek revenge on them all.

This book can be seen as an exploration of the highly destructive force of unresolved guilt. The person most destroyed by the murder was Elsa, who spiritually kills herself. Elsa is left with a life devoid of pleasure or meaning. The reader never knows what happens to Elsa: whether she is indicted for murder or not. Poirot feels there is 'not sufficient evidence' to convict Elsa. Shockingly the police 'will not be anxious to proceed against any one in your position unless there is ample justification': the police were still deferential to aristocracy in the 1940s. However, one does feel Elsa is under a life sentence of misery: she is punished every moment, with every breath she takes. Caroline, too, was never free of the guilt of physically scarring Angela, until 'paying the debt', as she thought, with her life.

The description of Caroline being serene in prison writing 'One must pay one's debts'. Amyas, the only reason for her life is dead. One is sad that poor little Carla, their daughter, is going to be an orphan at the age of 6, but Caroline knew she will be well looked after in Canada. Caroline could sacrifice herself, to save the only other person she really loved and has injured in the past, Angela. Most importantly, Caroline herself has found a way to expiate her guilt for the terrible act she did as a child.

### **3] Agatha Christie still subconsciously working through her first failed marriage:**

The third way to 'read' this book is to see it as further psychological catharsis for the most painful period in Agatha Christie's personal life: the break-up of her marriage to Archie Christie, sixteen years earlier. It cannot be a coincidence that the murder of Amyas Crale was sixteen years ago in the book. In 1926 when Agatha Christie was 36 years old with a 5-year-old daughter, Rosalind, Archie left them for the young and beautiful Nancy Neele. In *Five Little Pigs* Amyas Crale appears to be about to leave his wife, Caroline, and their 5-year-old daughter for the young and beautiful Elsa Greer. Christie knew too well all the thoughts and feelings Caroline Crale experienced as she decided to commit suicide with the hemlock she stole from Meredith's laboratory. Agatha Christie, like Elinor Carlisle in *Sad Cypress* and Caroline Crale in *Five Little Pigs* was trying to come to terms with the man she adored passionately, having an affair with a much younger, unmarried girl. Amyas says 'I told her candidly the sort of damnable egoistic, loose-living kind of chap I was.' Poirot's comment is 'A lot of additional pain and grief is caused by honesty.'

Caroline, when she realises the marriage is over, was 'desperate' 'a kind of anguished grief' in her eyes 'that was the most moving thing I have ever known', observes Meredith Blake. 'Sixteen years ago, divorce wasn't looked on quite so much as a matter of course as it is now.'

Amyas, at least, was decent enough to remonstrate with Elsa about Caroline's pain 'don't you realise, Elsa, that she's going to suffer – *suffer*? Don't you know what suffering means?'

In her trial Caroline Crale told the Court she had taken the hemlock for herself, and Mr. Blake remembered her saying 'I'm finished, Meredith' when he saw her at tea. Clearly Caroline was contemplating suicide. But what of their child? Poirot remarks, 'in the usual breakup of a marriage the child forms a very important point. But here the child seems to count for very little.' Miss Williams observes 'most children suffer from over-attention on the part of their parents. There is too much love, too much watching over the child. The best thing for a child is to have what I should term healthy neglect on the part of both its parents.' A remark almost reminiscent of Oscar Wilde's Lady Bracknell. Miss Williams continues 'Mrs Crale was really completely wrapped up in her husband. She existed, one might say, only in him and for him.' She then finishes her summing up with a blast of fierce feminism, 'but he, of course, was a man.' Christie says 'Nobody hearing her speak could doubt that to Miss Williams Men were the Enemy!' Feminism apart, this is an insight into Agatha Christie's feelings for Archie, and her despair when he left her. Agatha Christie was known to have run out of their house that night, leaving her 5-year-old daughter behind with the governess, and 'disappearing' for ten days, whilst Scotland Yard dragged the nearby gravel pits in case her body was there. The police took Archie Christie in for questioning about the suspicious disappearance of his wife. There are many Christie female characters that attempt suicide after a relationship breakup. It seems highly likely that Christie rushed out that night intent on suicide. After this very unhappy episode, Agatha Christie refused to answer any questions about her disappearance, or what happened during it, or why she never came forward when there was a huge police hunt for her. Sixteen years later, over the safe gulf of time, and most importantly happily married to Max Mallowan, she is perhaps finally working through these final pangs by writing therapy. 'To a sensitive person like Caroline, the horror and remorse never quite leave you.' This is speaking of Caroline's outburst of temper, aged 15, that scars Angela for life. 'That knowledge never left her in peace.' By sacrificing herself, mistakenly for Angela, eventually Caroline Crale 'in prison ...was quiet and serene.' Amyas was never going to leave his faithful, beautiful, dignified, intelligent, adoring wife for some chit of a girl who was all make-up and no clothes, and who couldn't hold an interesting conversation about anything that mattered. One wonders what would have happened if Archie Christie had chosen to stay with Agatha Christie. I think it's very significant that at the end of this book, Elsa says 'She [Caroline] and Amyas both escaped – they went somewhere I couldn't get at them. But they didn't die. I died.' Agatha Christie finally buried some hatchets deep in this book.

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