

Evil under the Sun

1941

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

Sherlock Holmes seems to have had little interest in the opposite sex. Was he asexual, or secretly homosexual perhaps? There was Irene Adler but although he admired her integrity and intellect, and the fact that she had beaten him at his own game, there is no evidence that he was sexually attracted to her: no evidence for lust. Poirot, too, is widely regarded as asexual but he shows considerably more admiration for women than did Holmes. One senses that he is mildly attracted to Katherine Grey in *The Mystery of the Blue Train*. There is the Countess Vera Rossakoff whom we met in *The Big Four* and whom we will meet again. It is only the effect of Lady Egware's sexual charms (in *Lord Egware Dies*) that can explain why Poirot capitulates to her request for him to take on the role of divorce broker. In *Evil under the Sun*, however, there is no doubt of his heterosexual interests. Perhaps it is the sun, the sand, and the scantily clad young women that put Poirot in the mood.



Uncharacteristically Poirot engages in a conversation about women with the crude, almost lewd, Major Barry. In response to Barry's saying: 'Good-looking fillies, some of 'em' Poirot says: 'Yes, but what appeal is there? What mystery? I, I am old, of the old school. When I was young, one saw barely the ankle. The glimpse of a foamy petticoat, how alluring! The gentle swelling of the calf – a knee – a beribboned garter.' Fortunately Poirot proceeds no further on this anatomical journey. When Arlena Marshall arrives: 'The eyes of Hercule Poirot opened, his moustache quivered appreciatively' and he is sufficiently taken with her to immerse his white suede shoes in the sea when helping her to sail off to her fateful rendezvous. It is not the rather stupid Arlena, however, who takes his main fancy. It is Rosamund Darnley.

'As he has since admitted' Christie writes, 'he admired Rosamund Darnley as much as any woman he had ever met. He liked her distinction, the graceful lines of her figure, the alert proud carriage of her head. He liked the neat sleek waves of her dark hair and the ironic quality of her smile.' When she enters the room to be cross-questioned by the police we are told: 'As always, Hercule Poirot felt a keen sense of pleasure at the sight of Rosamund Darnley.' And when Poirot searches her room in the hotel Poirot 'lingered for a moment in the sheer pleasure of the owner's

personality.’ One hopes for Poirot’s sake that she is not going to turn out to be the murderer.

The novel starts with Poirot ‘resplendent in a white duck suit’ sitting in a deck-chair vaguely listening to Mrs Gardener’s conversation which is likened to the almost ceaseless yapping of a Pomeranian.



Mrs Gardener is one of Christie’s rather silly women who, like Dickens’ Mrs Nickleby, talks to no very significant purpose but who provides some humorous scenes and useful analogies.

‘There now, where does this white piece fit in? It must be part of the fur rug, but ...’

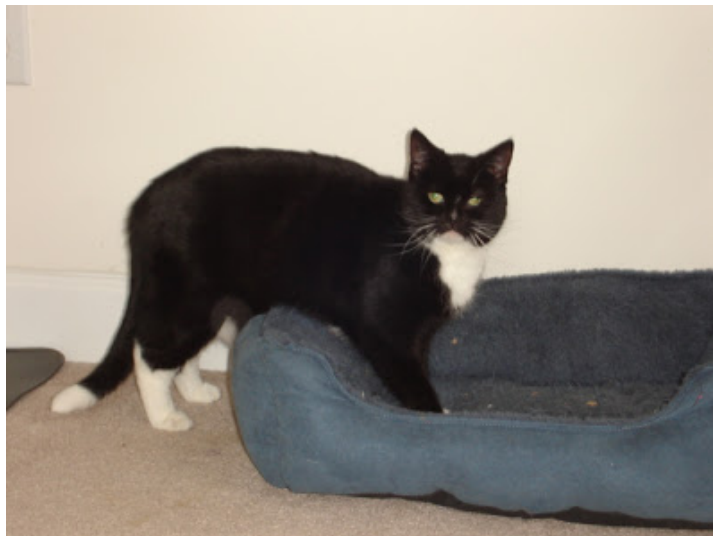
Poirot takes the piece of the jigsaw puzzle from Mrs Gardener and places it in the correct part of the puzzle.

‘It is part of the cat’ he says.

‘It can’t be. It’s a black cat’ says Mrs Gardener.

‘A black cat, yes, but you see the tip of the black cat’s tail happens to be white’

A while later, when talking to the local police inspector, Inspector Colgate, Poirot murmurs ‘so difficult to know which pieces are part of the fur rug and which are the cat’s tail.’



Poirot has used the analogy that solving a crime is like solving a jigsaw puzzle before (e.g. in *Hercule Poirot's Christmas*). It is a powerful analogy which few writers can make work. The point about a jigsaw is that each piece, by itself, is meaningless, but taken with other pieces can form a coherent picture. A Christie novel will normally contain several 'pictures': the one that is the main story that includes the crime or crimes to be solved, and some side stories that function as red-herrings to mislead the reader. The difficulty for the writer, as we have seen in several Christie novels, is that the pieces of the puzzle that relate to the side stories will often fit to produce a picture that includes the main puzzle. The 'correct' solution is no more nor less convincing than other possible solutions.

In *Evil under the Sun* Christie provides a very large number of jigsaw pieces. I tried counting and grouping them. I came up with around 31 pieces altogether, of which 28 clearly implicate one or other of the characters. The remaining three relate to the mechanism of the murder and its associated alibis. Can readers with intellects more like Poirot's than Mrs Gardener's place the pieces to form a coherent picture and identify the white tip of the cat's tail? I think that very few readers could do this based on the jigsaw pieces that Christie so abundantly provides. Poirot makes it clear that the bottle thrown from a hotel window and the bath taken at noon that no-one admits to taking are important pieces of the puzzle – and they turn out to be relevant to the mechanism of the alibis – but it is almost impossible to use these pieces to work out the mechanism, or even to confirm it. There is one specific clue that brings suspicion on Christine Redfern. It is a subtle clue that is all the more significant because Christie uses her cunning to conceal it. This clue is the mismatch between the Christine on the island – timid, unathletic and frightened of heights, and the Christine on the day of the mainland outing when her guard is down and she happily walks over a bridge that is too vertiginous for Emily Brewster. There is also a clue that casts suspicion over Christine's partner in crime, and partner in life, Patrick Redfern. This clue is that it is strange but not remarked upon that when Patrick Redfern is apparently looking for Arlena he turns to Emily Brewster and suggests that they row round the island together. Why wouldn't he want to go by himself (or indeed walk round the island rather than row)? But given all the other pieces of the puzzle that variously implicate many of the other hotel guests, I don't think that based on the jigsaw pieces alone readers could confidently know that they had found the correct solution. Indeed one could see the whole analogy of the jigsaw puzzle as a glorious red herring.



The central puzzle in *Evil under the Sun* is about the mechanisms of the alibis and this, I suspect, was Christie's starting point for the plot. It is not easy to provide clues to a mechanism in the form of pieces of a jigsaw. A mechanism has too much structure. Christie must have been aware of this because she provides a major and

rather clever clue to the mechanism: this clue is in the form of a story rather than a piece of information and is sufficiently complex to allow the mechanism to be shown. Poirot asks the police to find out about any other recent cases of strangulation. One such case involved Alice Corrigan and Poirot believes that the murderer of Alice Corrigan is the person who killed Arlena. In keeping with his psychological approach he believes that the murderer will have used a similar *modus operandi*. The case of Alice Corrigan is in essence this:

A woman hiker comes across the body of a dead woman on the moor at 4.15pm. She walks to the nearest main town, which takes her perhaps around an hour, to report her find to the police, saying that the dead woman had only been dead a short time when she found her. The body is examined at 5.45pm by the police surgeon who confirms that death occurred one to two hours earlier. The woman had died from being strangled. The husband, Edward Corrigan, is the chief suspect but appears to have a cast-iron alibi. He was on a train and then bus for much of the afternoon until 4.25pm when he arrives at a café where he says he arranged to meet his wife for tea. He orders tea, but tells the staff not to bring it until his wife arrives. He then leaves the café 'walking about outside waiting for his wife'. He returns to the café sometime before 5pm. The spot where his wife is found dead is on the moors not far from the café – it is thought that she was going to be early for the tea date with her husband and so stopped to admire the view. The murderer has never been found.

Since, as Poirot makes clear, this story is relevant to the murder of Arlena, the husband or the hiker must have been the killer of Alice Corrigan as there is no one else in the story. The hiker appears not to have been suspected because she was a reliable school games mistress and had no motive. Perhaps also, though it is not stated, the marks show that the strangulation had been carried out by someone with large hands. It would seem that the point of the story is that the husband's apparent alibi is somehow not an alibi. How could this be? From what we are told it is clear that the husband could have murdered his wife between 4.25pm and 5pm: he had left the café and his wife was murdered only a short distance away. What makes that impossible is that the hiker found her dead at 4.15pm. The only way that the husband could have been the murderer is if the hiker had lied. So the husband and the hiker would have had to have been in it together: the hiker falsely reporting a death so that the time of the murder would be thought to have been earlier than it in fact was.

If a reader takes this reasoning thus far the question is how does it relate to the murder of Arlena. At first it does not seem to fit. Arlena's dead body was seen by two people: Patrick Redfern and Emily Brewster. What is similar, however, is that Arlena's body is not examined by the authorities until some time later. Almost everyone has an alibi for the time up to and including when Patrick and Emily say they discovered the body. But suppose, as in the Corrigan case, Arlena has not yet been murdered at the time that her body is supposed to have been discovered?

These thoughts might lead to the conclusion that Patrick and Emily are in this together – Emily playing the part of the hiker. On this view there need be no body on the beach, only Arlena, alive, who is then murdered by Patrick. That is a possible solution although it is not clear what the connection is between Patrick and Emily. It is however a reasonable solution and has some advantages over the correct solution. The main advantage of the correct solution is that Patrick and Christine are a more obvious partnership – and Christine’s lie about vertigo begins to make sense.

There are difficulties with the correct solution. Arlena might easily have looked out from her hiding place in the cave at the crucial moment, or not have hid there in the first place. And the timing had to be so precise as to be almost impossible. Had Patrick and Emily rounded the bay in their boat two minutes earlier they would have seen Christine clearly alive on the beach preparing to be the corpse. One might have expected standard police procedure to have discovered that the hiker and the husband in the Corrigan case had changed their names and apparently married. But Christie would have reasonably seen these as carping criticisms. Her brilliant clue by analogy – the Alice Corrigan case – if carefully analysed provides strong evidence against Patrick Redfern. I think, though, that the idea that Emily Brewster is his accomplice is at least as convincing as the correct solution. In either case the plot is unusual in Christie’s *oeuvre* in that the alibis are created by the murder appearing to have been committed *earlier* than it in fact was. Much more common are plots in which the murders appear to have been committed later than is actually the case.

Perhaps because the perpetrators are a couple, there is more about relationships between men and women than in most of Christie’s crime novels. Christie may now feel able to write from her own experiences and feelings when Archie Christie left her for Nancy Neele. Was she thinking of Nancy Neele when she wrote: ‘There’s a type of woman .. who likes smashing up homes’? Men can also be predatory – Patrick particularly but also the bachelor, Major Barry, although he is not criminal and more a figure of fun. Christie writes about him: ‘He was accustomed to think of The Husband in three lights only – as ‘the Obstacle’, ‘the Inconvenience’ or ‘the Safeguard’.

There is also some discussion of women and careers. Rosamund Darnley has set up a successful dress making business in London. She says to Poirot that, in his heart, he believes: ‘that no woman is content unless she is married and has children.’ Poirot replies: ‘To marry and have children, that is the common lot of women. Only one woman in a hundred – more, in a thousand, can make for herself a name and a position as you have done.’

One feels Poirot’s admiration and respect for a woman who, like Christie of course, can make a successful career for herself. The novel’s ending therefore is tinged with sadness. As with so many of Christie’s novels, after the denouement there is a final tying up of a romance that had been brewing through the book. This time it is the romance between Rosamund and the victim’s husband Kenneth Marshall. If Poirot had ever entertained a hope of a romantic relationship with Rosamund these hopes are now dashed. But for the modern reader there may be sadness in the

conventionality of Rosamund's response to Marshall. In what is effectively his proposal of marriage he says to her: 'You're going to give up that damned dress-making business of yours and we are going to live in the country.'

She replies with proper feistiness: 'Don't you know that I make a very handsome income out of my business? Don't you realize that it's my business – that I created it and worked it up, and that I'm proud of it! And you've got a damned nerve to come along and say, "Give it all up, dear." ' But, the conversation continues:

'I've got the damned nerve to say it, yes.'

'And you think I care enough for you to do it?'

'If you don't,' said Kenneth Marshall, 'you'd be no good to me.'

Rosamund said softly:

'Oh, my dear, I've wanted to live in the country with you all my life. Now – it's going to come true ...'

Perhaps Rosamund would have had a more fulfilled life as the wife of Hercule Poirot.



Photos

Diana Rigg, who sadly died in 2020, as Arlena Marshall in the 1982 film of *Evil under the Sun*

<http://na-shpilke.livejournal.com/93913.html>

Pomeranian dog

<http://www.pomeraniandogsite.com/>

A black cat may have a white tail

<http://culpeperfelines.blogspot.co.uk/>

Jigsaw puzzle pieces

<http://www.pages.drexel.edu/~arz25/history4a.html>

Burgh Island, the inspiration for the setting of the novel.

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Burgh_Island

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