

## The Body in the Library 1942

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

*The Body in the Library* is the second Miss Marple novel. The first, *Murder at the Vicarage*, was published more than a decade earlier. We have seen that the novels featuring Tommy and Tuppence are somewhat different from those with Poirot. Tommy and Tuppence are people of action rather than of thought. The novels, although with a *whodunnit* element, are adventure stories. Almost all the novels in which Poirot is the detective are straight *whodunnits*. To solve the puzzle Poirot makes use of a range of clues. But whatever clues he uses he has to *think* – he has to use his ‘little grey cells’. Thinking, not acting, is his *métier*.

Marple seems to have yet another cast of mind, quite different from Poirot’s. Poirot, an immigrant, with no clear sense of place or of belonging, thinks in an abstract and logical way. Marple, on the other hand, is firmly situated in the very English village of St Mary Mead, with church and vicar, pub, family doctor and manor. She has known most of her neighbours for many years.

Marple, unlike Poirot, seldom needs to sit down with a metaphorical pipe or go for a walk to clear her brain. She uses what others call *intuition* and what she says is ‘specialized knowledge’. She tends to see things almost immediately using her understanding of human nature – her understanding of human psychology.

The hallmark of Marple’s method of thinking is by analogy – making use of ‘interesting, though occasionally trivial, series of parallels from village life’ as Sir Henry Clithering explains it. Occasionally she makes use of generalisations about human nature without specific analogies – as when she confidently, and correctly, guesses that Dinah Lee and Basil Blake are married, although they pretend not to be. ‘This was quite easy to guess’ she tells Dinah, because ‘the kind of quarrels you have – typical of the early days of marriage. Quite – quite unlike an illicit relationship.’ It seems unlikely that Marple, in 1944, would have had sufficient experience of ‘illicit relationships’ on which to base such a dubious generalisation. In any case psychological insight plays no role in solving the mystery. Instead it serves to establish to readers in the 1940’s that despite appearances Basil Blake is not living in sin and is actually a good egg. Be that as it may, Marple appears to work on the basis of rapid psychological insights, whereas psychology, for all his rhetoric, plays little part in Poirot’s reasoning.

These marked differences between the minds of Poirot and Marple would, one might conjecture, lead to related differences between the clueing, plot and solution of the novels in which each appears. Is the clueing determined by, or at least influenced by, the way each detective thinks? The answer is **no**. Although the settings and the conversations and the rhetoric in a Marple novel are different from those in a Poirot novel, the ways in which Christie sets the clues, the ways that she leads, and misleads, the reader, are very similar.

In our analysis of *Murder at the Vicarage* we wondered whether Marple's predilection for human stories had been the reason why, in that novel, there were so many sub-plots and therefore so many red herrings. The genuine clues, however, were too scant to test the hypothesis that the mind of the detective influences the clueing. We now have this second Marple novel as evidence.

How relevant are Marple's village life analogies to her solving the mystery, and do they provide clues available for use by the reader? In *The Body in the Library* there are nine such analogies. One enables Marple to identify which friend of the murdered girl guide has been lying. The information gained on further questioning is helpful to understanding the whole plot, although not particularly helpful in identifying the murderer.

Two village analogies - those involving a Mr Harbottle and a Mr Badger are a parallel for Mr Jefferson wanting to leave much of his fortune to the first victim, Ruby Keene, but they provide no insights, either for Marple or the reader, that help identify Ruby Keene's murderer. Marple says at one point that Josie Turner, a major character in the novel, reminds her of Jessie Golden, the baker's daughter. Both are hardheaded, ambitious and good tempered. But Jessie Golden's history - she trained as a governess, married the son of the house, and made him a good wife - is of little help although it does perhaps contain an arcane hint about Josie's secret marriage. And Mark Gaskell, Marple says, is like Mr Cargill, the builder, who 'bluffed a lot of people into having things done to their houses they never meant to do.' But this doesn't tell us anything we don't already know about him.

Two are analogies relevant to friends of Marple but have nothing to do with the murder plot. That leaves just two analogies that give Miss Marple some insights relevant to the murder puzzle. In chapter 5 during a discussion about why the body of Ruby Keene was in Colonel Bantry's library, the chief constable, Colonel Melchett, says: 'Come now, Miss Marple, haven't you got an explanation?' 'Oh yes' replies Marple 'Tommy Bond and Mrs Martin, our new schoolmistress. She went to wind up the clock and a frog jumped out.' We learn much later that just as Tommy Bond put the frog in the clock case as a silly practical joke, so the dead body of Ruby Keene was moved by Basil Blake from his home, where the murderer left it, to Colonel Bantry's library. He did this partly as a macabre practical joke though more significantly to avoid becoming a suspect. Whether the analogy with the frog helped Marple to see that the body had been moved from where the murderer had left it or whether she realised this first and therefore thought of the analogy is not clear. In any case the analogy is of no help to the reader.

The most significant of Marple's analogies is related in chapter 1. After Marple has seen the body in the library, her friend, Mrs Bantry, asks: 'Doesn't it remind you of anything?' Marple replies: 'I was reminded a little of Mrs Chetty's youngest - Edie, you know - but I think that was just because this poor girl [referring to the murder victim] bit her nails and her front teeth stuck out a little ... And of course Edie was fond of what I call cheap finery too.'

The description of the dead woman does indeed provide both Miss Marple and the reader with significant clues, but the analogy with Edie plays no part.

In conclusion, apart from helping her to realise that one of the girl guides was lying, Marple's 'parallels from village life' have been of little use to her, and none has been useful to the reader.

*The Body in the Library* can be solved by drawing correct conclusions from some fair, though not obvious, clues. The reasoning – essentially that used by Miss Marple – is as follows.

The dead girl found in Colonel Bantry's library had bitten finger nails and protruding teeth. Her body was identified as that of Ruby Keene. Much later we learn that Ruby Keene had teeth that 'ran down her throat' – that is they were certainly not protruding. We also learn that although her nails were usually long they had been *cut* short on the night she was murdered. If these two *physical* clues are picked up by the reader then the clear conclusion is that the body in the library is not that of Ruby Keene. There is an alternative possibility to hand. A Girl Guide has gone missing, her body presumed to be the charred remains found in a burnt out car and identified only by a shoe that was spared by the fire. If the body in the library is that of the Girl Guide then the person who falsely identified it as Ruby Keene will almost certainly be the murderer or an accomplice. And such proves to be the case.

Christie at her best has a single central idea that she then skilfully disguises from the reader. Several previous novels have hinged on alibis being false because the assumed time of the murder has been false. Occasionally the murder has taken place after the presumed time, more frequently it has occurred before. Various mechanisms have been used to falsify the apparent time of the murder. In one previous novel the falsification has been by a living person impersonating the corpse.

The central idea in *The Body in the Library* is that if a dead body is wrongly presumed to be that of person X then this can create a false alibi. The medical evidence, which in *whodunnits* is always remarkably exact and treated as certain fact, is that the person whose body is found in the library died between 10pm and midnight. Ruby Keene was certainly alive at 10.40. Therefore anyone with an alibi for the period from 10.40 to midnight cannot have killed Ruby Keene, or so it would seem. In fact the body in the library is that of the poor Girl Guide who was killed before 10.40. Ruby Keene's body is the one burnt in the car fire and she might have been killed at almost any time.

Josie is the person who falsely identified the body in the library as that of Ruby Keene. The reader who has picked up the two subtle but very definite clues and thought through their implications can get this far. Josie however could not have carried out both murders. She needs an accomplice and a motive. The two people who most obviously benefit from Ruby Keene's murder are the two children-in-law of Mr Jefferson: Mark Gaskel and Addie Jefferson. They had expected to inherit Mr Jefferson's considerable fortune on his death, which is expected quite

soon. Mr Jefferson, however, has taken a shine to Ruby Keene and has said he will change his will and leave his money to her. If this is to provide a motive for Josie to be an accomplice then she must also stand to gain by either Mark's or Addie's inheritance. The most obvious way is for Josie and Mark to be romantically attached, and this turns out to be the case – indeed they are already secretly married.

Josie and Mark are, in fact, the murderers but there is another possible motive for why Josie might want Ruby Keene out of the way. Mr Jefferson is looking for a personable young woman who also reminds him to some extent of his dead daughter. He hits, as we have seen, on Ruby Keene. But suppose that he had been considering Josie herself for this part. We know that he and Josie got on well. Suppose that he had indicated to Josie that he would 'adopt' her and leave her the remainder of his fortune. And then Ruby Keene comes along and displaces Josie in Mr Jefferson's affections and plans. With Ruby out of the way, Josie might regain her position with Mr Jefferson.

This would give Josie reason for the murder independently of either Mark or Addie. Her accomplice could be Raymond Starr, the dancer and tennis coach - a handsome young man who works closely with her at the hotel. Another possibility is Basil Blake. We know that Josie and Basil have met and danced together at the hotel. Both these men are more likely romantic partners for Josie than Mark Gaskell.

Despite the emphasis on Marple's village analogies, none is helpful to the reader in solving the mystery, and in so far as they are of value to Miss Marple they assist her only in her observations and not in her reasoning. The key clues are physical – bitten nails and the look of the teeth. These are just the type of clue that Poirot often uses, particularly in the early novels. We have seen over the course of the Poirot novels that Christie uses a range of types of clue – things said, unusual patterns of behaviour, oddities in the method of murder, similarities with other related murders, and physical clues. The clues in this Miss Marple are rather fewer than in most Poirot novels but they are not of a different sort. Neither does the plot seem to be in any way affected by the presence of Miss Marple. There is a clever central idea about the alibi which whilst being typical of Agatha Christie might just as readily have been used for a Poirot novel. The setting and *dramatis personae* are rather different in a Marple novel, and Marple behaves somewhat differently from Poirot, but the clues, plots and solutions are uninfluenced by the character of the detective. Poirot and Marple inhabit exactly the same kind of detective story.

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