

Third Girl

1966

(Plot spoilers to this novel ahead)

For most people who remember 1966, it was the year England won the Football World Cup. Prime Minister Harold Wilson called a snap general election to increase his Parliamentary majority, and there were violent protests against the Vietnam War. The Beatles released their LP 'Revolver'. The 60s in London were at the height of their swing, and Agatha Christie, now writing when 75 years old, was still bang up to date, gamely noting all the societal changes.

There is distaste for the modern, unwashed, longhaired youth, expressed by different elderly characters in this novel.

Poirot asks his manservant: 'is she a young lady rather than a young person?' 'It is not always easy to tell nowadays.' George spoke with genuine regret'. This could be a line out of Oscar Wilde's *The Importance of Being Earnest*.

Later in the book Ariadne Oliver confessed:

'so hard to tell whether they're girls or boys, isn't it?'

Sir Roderick Horsefield, an 'elderly man' – described as over 65 years old, who was in Intelligence in WW2 says:

'chaps with the long hair and the dirty nails. You never know which sex they are, which is embarrassing. But you turn them out of the house, and then find out it's Viscount Endersleigh, or Lady Charlotte Marjoribanks.'

Some of the book's action takes place in London at 'The Worlds End'. This is a real area in the Borough of Kensington and Chelsea; in the 1960's the hippest place to have an artist studio, where you might have met Twiggy, Jean Shrimpton, or Keith Richards out shopping. Of all events and people in this dramatic time of change, the text mentions The Beatles, the BBC, and Ribena; that's real fame.

The combination of Oliver and Poirot is more equally balanced than that of Hastings and Poirot. Oliver and Poirot are the ying and the yang of detectives. Oliver has her own energy and adds significant information, whereas Hastings usually blundered along on Poirot's coat tails with incomprehension, to gasp in admiration at the final dénouement. Poirot and Oliver come together in this novel because they are both bored. Poirot has just 'finished his *Magnum Opus*, an analysis of great writers of detective fiction', which he was working on in *The Clocks* [1963]. Ariadne Oliver has just handed in her latest typescript. One feels the Christie authorial venom as Mrs. Oliver addresses her imaginary publisher who had been 'constantly prodding her about typescript, every three or four days'

'There you are, and I hope you like it! I don't. I think it's *lousy!* I don't believe you know whether anything I write is good or bad.'

Mrs. Oliver 'always claimed the right to justify the particular intuition which turned out to be right!' Poirot noted that Mrs. Oliver's 'feelings' can be in tune with events: 'very often with animals the uneasiness of a dog or cat before a thunderstorm, the knowledge that there is something wrong, although one does not know what it is that is wrong.' Poirot, in contrast, 'thought in a certain way peculiar to himself. It was a technique of a man who selected thoughts as one might select pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. In due course they would be reassembled together so as to make a clear and coherent picture. At the moment the important thing was the selection'. Poirot 'was not an intuitive person – but he did have *feelings*. He knew evil...he knew the taste of it..he did not yet know exactly where it *was*.' Even the way these two characters chose flowers is diametrically opposite. Poirot presented Mrs. Oliver 'with a bouquet, very stylised, a posy in the Victorian manner,..a prim circle of rosebuds'.

'M. Poirot! Well, really, that's very nice of you, and it's very like you somehow. All my flowers are always so untidy.' She looked towards a vase of rather temperamental-looking chrysanthemums.'

Mrs. Oliver craves physical activity: 'I wish we could do something,' said Mrs Oliver – always one for action'. She gets a great deal of it in this story. Poirot's idea of action is cerebral, sitting comfortably in his flat attended by George, and Miss Lemon, with a suitably interesting problem to wrestle with, and a tisane on a table beside his armchair. Both detectives are described in the book in canine terms:

'Mrs. Oliver felt at this moment less like a detective novelist than like an ardent bloodhound. She was on the trail, nose down on the scent.' Poirot describes himself as 'an old Belgian police dog.' Later Poirot says he enjoys being 'the good dog who hunts down murder.'

Yet again Christie does something new, mixed with something old. The first 'proper' murder occurs very late, 86% of the way through this book. In early Christies there is usually a murder in the first chapter, and several more in the first half of the book. At the start of *Third Girl*, Norma Restarick, a twenty year old, interrupts Poirot's civilised world by a clash of generations and etiquette; the great man was eating his breakfast of hot chocolate and a brioche, when she insists on being seen. Poirot is not impressed by Norma's appearance. 'Long straggly hair of indeterminate colour strayed over her shoulders. Her eyes, which were large, bore a vacant expression. Black high leather boots, white open-work woollen stockings of doubtful cleanliness, a skimpy skirt, and a long and sloppy pullover of heavy wool.'

'Anyone of Poirot's age and generation would have had only one desire. To drop the girl into a bath as soon as possible. There were hundreds of girls looking exactly the same. They all looked dirty...this one had the look of having been recently drowned and pulled out of a river. Such girls, he reflected, were not perhaps really dirty. They merely took enormous care and pains to look so.' Nor was Poirot impressed by her conversation. Norma blurts out that she 'might have committed a murder.'

Poirot, in a reply reminiscent of Lady Bracknell acerbically replies: 'Surely that is not a matter that admits of any doubt'

Norma stares at Poirot: 'You're too old. Nobody told me you were so old.'

Poirot later complains to Mrs Oliver. Mrs. Oliver:

'girls are like that. Anyone over thirty-five they think is half dead. They've no sense' 'It wounded me.'

This has all the pathos of Sir Andrew Aguecheek's 'I was adored once', and the reader feels sorry for Poirot's hurt vanity.

Both Poirot and Oliver independently find Norma Restarick reminds them of the tragic figure of Ophelia in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. It is both Norma's appearance, and her odd, variable mental state that trigger the comparison.

Poirot thinks: 'There were two opinions about Norma. Was Ophelia mad or was she pretending madness? Actresses had been variously divided as to how the part should be played – or perhaps, he should say, producers. Was Hamlet mad or sane? Take your choice.' This is the true pivotal point of the plot, which can be seen as an extension of ideas exploring the boundaries of madness, or mental instability, started in *They Do it With Mirrors* (1952). The reader has to make this choice to solve the puzzle.

Norma herself says 'I lose an hour of time – two hours – and I can't *remember*' *it must have been me*' who tried to poison Mary Restarick, her stepmother. After this, Norma overheard her father and a doctor 'planning together – to send me away to a place where I'd be shut up!..They thought that I was crazy'. Which is why Norma decided to run away. Norma's flatmate, Frances Carey found Norma with a gun in

her hand and said 'Norma what on earth have you done?' Later, when Norma is standing over the body of her boyfriend, David Baker:

'In a quiet reflective voice:

"Yes, I've killed him..The blood got on my hands from the knife..I went to the bathroom to wash it off – but you can't really wash things like that off, can you?'

Norma justified her actions: 'I never remembered the things I'd done..I did kill people, but I didn't remember killing them, so I'm not really a murderer – I'm just – mad!'

This appeared to be an open and shut case. Norma, her father and stepmother are all convinced of her madness, and guilt. Yet, Poirot takes the trouble to interview Norma's old headmistress, Miss Battersby of Meadow School, not Meadowbank School as in *Cat among the Pigeons* [1959]. 'Norma was a perfectly ordinary girl. Not scholastically brilliant, but her work was adequate.' The late Mrs. Restarick, Norma's mother, was 'self-righteous, censorious and handicapped in life by being ..extremely stupid!'

'Ah,' said Poirot appreciatively.

'Norma was not a girl to whom I could recommend a career. A nice ordinary job followed by marriage and children was what I would have hoped for her.'

'Girls are frequently attracted to completely unsuitable, sometimes even dangerous young men. There are no parents nowadays, or hardly any, with the strength of character to save them from this, so they often go through a time of hysterical misery, and perhaps make an unsuitable marriage which ends not long after in divorce. Mental instability! – rubbish!'

In a Christie, wise headmistresses are seldom wrong.

The clues that Norma is taking mind-altering drugs are there from the first description: 'Her eyes, which were large, bore a vacant expression'. Norma's other flatmate, Claudia, says to Frances Carey 'I cannot say I care for your all your arty set. Trying out all these drugs and passing out or getting fighting mad.' Yet it is Norma who is behaving oddly, not Frances. This is another huge clue. Frances is always self-possessed. Finally the girls' cleaning lady, in a matter of fact way spoke to Mrs. Oliver:

'Maybe she takes things – a lot do.'

At the dénouement, Norma's father is trying to devolve blame from his daughter's confession of murder by suggesting 'Someone was hypnotising her to do these things.' It is left to the psychiatrist, Dr Stillingfleet, to give his opinion, since he has been looking after Norma for 10 days.

'That girl is sane. She was full of drugs...LSD giving vivid dream sequences. Hemp distorting the time factor..And many other curious substances..somebody who was clever with drugs played merry hell with that girl. Nobody could make the girl do what she didn't want to do! What they could do, was to make her think she had done it.'

Mrs. Oliver says of Norma after the murder of David Baker:

'She was quite different today, not scatty any longer.'

Poirot nodded.

'Not Ophelia – Iphigeneia.'

This is a huge clue, but the literary allusion is not explained in the text. This was Christie code to mean Norma was the sacrificial victim that her father was prepared to slaughter.

There are clues that Andrew Restarick is not the man he was when

'He ditched his wife, and went off with an attractive bit of goods to South Africa, but that might happen to any man', as Andrew's Uncle, Sir Roderick succinctly put it.

Norma said of her father, when he returns fifteen years later to claim his huge inheritance:

'I wouldn't even have known him if I'd met him in the street by the time he did come back. My father isn't at all like I remember him when I was five years old.'

There was the visual clue of Restarick's portrait displayed proudly in his City office to proclaim the man. He was 'strangely little changed from the man some fifteen years younger in the picture hanging above him'. Frances Carey knew the 'arty set', and there are suspicions of art forgery in the fashionable gallery where she worked. Given Restarick's own daughter did not recognise him, and his portrait could have been re-painted, the clues are fair that Andrew Restarick is an imposter. This also neatly explains the 'suicide' of his ex-mistress, who lived in the flat above Norma's.

The weakness of this plot is the man purporting to be Andrew Restarick moves in with 'his Uncle'. Why would he risk this? However, Sir Roderick Horsefield does not detect the deception, despite having been in Intelligence in the War. At some points of the book, Sir Roderick is described as 'blind as a bat and gaga', but his conversations with Poirot show he still had good cognitive function, and enough vision to get by. It is Sir Roderick who tells Poirot that Mary Restarick wore a blonde wig, which was very helpful information that she could change her appearance rapidly.

People's voices do not change over a gap of 15 years, even if their appearance may. One would expect Norma Restarick, and Uncle Roderick to tell the difference in Andrew's voice, memory and mannerisms, and out this imposter. I find this part of the plot impossible to believe.

Poirot's dénouement summary of Restarick was 'Here was a man who had no near friends or relatives'. This statement must be challenged. 'Andrew Restarick' was staying with his Uncle, and had a daughter. Neither would have taken long to find out he knew nothing about their supposedly shared past lives. Also from information supplied by Chief Inspector Neele we know Andrew Restarick 'came down from Oxford', so there would be many college friends keen to look Restarick up, to sponge off him, with his newly acquired vast wealth, as well as others who would have gone into the City, whom he'd be bound to meet on a regular basis.

We are told the first Mrs. Restarick 'tore up' all photographs of her roving husband, so perhaps Christie was aware of this plot weakness, but Christie has forgotten about Oxford College photos, or possible family albums his uncle must have, but these are never mentioned.

The other weakness of plot is although Norma did have drug-induced gaps of memory, one cannot understand why she thinks she has committed murder, rather than saying 'I'm sure I could not have done this.' Or wondering if she had absent attacks, epilepsy, and seeking advice from a reputable neurologist.

Poirot stated: 'The only person who could have killed Louise was...Frances Cary.' Again this is completely untrue. Louise was an alcoholic middle-aged lady living alone. Anyone could have pushed Louise out of her window at 5 am, including Andrew Restarick or another ex-lover, the Conservative MP Mr Reece-Holland, who 'made quite a good deal of money ..by rather doubtful means.'

There was careful setting up descriptions of the new block of flats, where both Norma and Louise lived. The rooms were very similar: 'all rooms papered the same with an artificial raw wood pattern..a foundation of modern built-in furniture, cupboard, bookshelves and so on, a large settee and a pull-out type of table.' Also the shoddy numbers of the flat doors keep falling off, the 76 of Louise's flat narrowly missing Poirot's patent leather shoe, and Mrs Oliver having to replace the 7 of 67 on Norma's door. As a reader, I was expecting a clever slight of hand about the two flats, or an explanation of how Norma held some 'torn curtain' from Louise's flat in her hand, but

these potential clues or red herrings were never developed. One can see Christie playing with ideas of 67 and 76 in a way rather similar to the numbering of houses in Wilbraham Crescent from *The Clocks* [1963]. Perhaps whilst writing *Third Girl*, Christie realised that people did add little individual finishing touches to their flats, so although the basic template of flat design and furnishing was the same, the different flats would be immediately obvious to the occupant. Also the views out of the window would be very different from different floors. It is an odd example of a possible idea that is never developed, but yet not deleted from the text.

It is also worth noting that the psychiatrist, Dr Stillingfleet, proposed to Norma at the end of the novel, after she has been his inpatient for ten days. Norma accepted Stillingfleet despite being under the age of consent (21 years). This behaviour by a doctor would now trigger immediate referral to the General Medical Council for a disciplinary hearing, and probably struck off the Medical Register.

There is much humour in *Third Girl*. Ariadne Oliver has added artificial additions to her coiffure; 'a super imperial coil of hair detached itself completely and fell on the floor. Poirot picked it up and put it discreetly on the table.' She sheds coils of hair like a snake sheds its skin. On seeing a rickety 'ladder-like stairs' to an artists' studio, Mrs. Oliver inquires 'Do you think they'll stand my weight?' before safely ascending. Mrs. Oliver also rants about her fictional Finn detective and her fans: 'they say how much they love my awful detective Sven Hjerson. If they knew how much I hated him. But my publisher says I'm not to say so.' Could this reflect Christie's feelings for Poirot?

The setting of a trendy Bond Street Art Gallery allows for a vivid dig at modern art. The gallery's owner, Mr Boscombe, talks sycophantically in 'a soft purring voice'. Boscombe praises Poirot for his 'great perspicacity'. 'Poirot and he looked together with both their heads on one side at an orange lop-sided diamond with two human eyes depending from it by what looked like a spidery thread.' Poirot thinks Boscombe 'would not hesitate at swindling ignorant millionaires by selling them dubious pictures.'

Poirot's magnum opus on Detective Crime Fiction writers 'apart from a really incredible number of printing errors', he 'pronounced that it was good'. This is like God in *Genesis*, who 'saw that it was very good.' 'Poirot himself was sure that everyone had always heard of him', 'it was an article of belief for Hercule Poirot'. Although Poirot is not without insight: 'Even I myself,' said Poirot to himself, in an unusual fit of modesty, 'even I myself am capable of vanity on occasions.'

The quick conclusion of this novel is that good young people will emigrate to Australia, where there is room to breathe and an opportunity for a new life. Poirot and Mrs. Oliver, despite their decrepitude, have saved the day:

'The old, though considered incapable of action, have nevertheless a good fund of experience on which to draw.'

[SH]

