

# Guardians of the Truth: The Elderly in Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction

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**Abstract:** In detective fiction written by Agatha Christie, the elderly characters are portrayed as being closely tied to the truth and consequently hold a crucial position in the narrative. As depicted in works centred on Miss Marple, old age represents a stage where one reaches the ability to understand human nature. The experience of the past enables the characters to recognize recurring patterns in human behaviour and use them in the search for the truth. Knowledge of this kind is subsequently elevated above rationality and deduction in the investigation process. The analysis conducted in the paper thus suggests that the elderly are the guardians and protectors of the truth that was purposefully hidden, twisted, or long forgotten, which is the case in Christie's non-Marple works such as *Elephants Can Remember* (1971). Despite their inconspicuousness, the elderly become the decisive piece needed to solve the puzzle. It is the ultimate realization of old age that although the world keeps changing, human nature remains the same.

**Keywords:** Agatha Christie, British detective fiction, Miss Marple, elderly, spinster

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Considering Agatha Christie's prolific career of more than 60 novels published around the world – not to mention her short story collections, drama, and other literary contributions – an attempt to provide a generalization of all elderly characters portrayed would be somewhat problematic. Due to her invention of Miss Marple, who became one of the most iconic characters of the Golden Age of British detective fiction, the presence of an elderly figure may be considered a prominent feature in her writing. Be it in the role of friendly advisors, wealthy but vulnerable victims opposing the plans of their families, or mere peculiar

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village characters, the elderly tend to serve a clear purpose in Christie's fiction. Therefore, the paper's scope covers a specific type of older people that requires special attention. It is the case of those who have a strong connection with the truth, a generation whose upbringing taught them to value what is true and uphold the principles it represents.

Ultimately, their abilities, achieved and sharpened by old age, prove to be the necessary means to defeat the murderer. Christie's writing style further highlights this. In a fictional world where conversationalist detection is at the forefront, the power of knowledge, memory, thought, and the spoken word prevails over physical strength, which is more advantageous in works accentuating action. Such gifts are possessed by the elderly Miss Marple, whose unique position in the narrative enables her to investigate, intervene with the events and act in the name of justice. Additionally, the paper discusses the role of elderly characters who do not participate in the investigation itself but are situated at the core of the crime. Their presence contributes to discovering the clues and ensures the final triumph of the truth. The following pages thus also deal with the less notorious sleuth Mr Satterthwaite. The same applies to minor characters in works like *Towards Zero* (1991), *4.50 from Paddington* (2016), *A Caribbean Mystery* (2002), or *Elephants Can Remember* (2011), the analysis of which demonstrates a prototypical use of the elderly as the protectors of the truth.

### **Old Age, Human Nature and the Power of Experience**

The paper focuses mainly on characters specifically depicted as a man or woman of an advanced age, and for whom, as may be argued, such description bears significant consequences in the narrative. However, philosophical approaches to the concept of old age show that classifications on the basis of age alone may be imprecise and insufficient. Although the mid-70s tend to be accepted as advanced age, this stage of life is manifested individually depending on biological, social and cultural factors (Scarre 2016, 6-9), which are the cause of stigmatization (Overall 2016, 17-18). Emphasizing the frailty of their bodies, Christie establishes the elderly in terms of biology, but the decisive factor appears to be retirement. It allows these characters to connect to the world around them without the pressures of daily schedules and follow their curiosity.

The most distinctive of the variations presented is the character of a spinster. Unmarried and without children, spinsters compensate for their lack of first-hand experience by witnessing other villagers' life stories. As observed

by Snell, Miss Marple as the spinster becomes “the micro-history expert ... of a parochial history figured in local people” (Snell 2010, 36). The way passing years transform their community grants them the knowledge of human nature. Apart from *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1986), where the phrase appears prominently, it is also referred to in the author's previous novels.<sup>2</sup> Miss Marple proves to be the true master of the technique. Based on similarity, she recognizes patterns in people's behaviour, thus decoding their potentially dangerous tendencies. As Marple herself explains, “[o]ne begins to class people ... just as though they were birds or flowers, group so and so, genus this, species that” (Christie 1986b, 252). Since she sorts them according to previously encountered categories, Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker classify her as a “structuralist detective” (Shaw and Vanacker 1991, 74). This recognition of the patterns corresponds with the intuition on which, in contrast with Poirot's cases, Miss Marple's stories, to an extent, rely. Equivalently to the skills mentioned above, intuition is strengthened with increasing age, as one gradually learns how to listen to one's inner voice. As stated by Marple, it 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 he's seen it before. (Christie 1986b, 97)

Elderly ladies are portrayed as sharing information via their networks of neighbours in the village. With respect to the image of older people as seekers of the truth, it is necessary to examine how gossip fits into such a view. Shaw and Vanacker notice that if gossip presents both misleading and truthful propositions, the investigating figure resolves the conflict by making the correct selection between one and the other (Shaw and Vanacker 1991, 67). The argument seems to be supported by Maryann

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2 Notably, it is included in *The Mystery of the Blue Train* (1991). Incidentally, the novel introduces two old female characters, Mrs Harfield and Miss Viner. While not directly connected to the murder investigation, the latter provides the protagonist Katherine Grey with an almost prophetic piece of wisdom. Katherine and her elderly friends reside in St Mary Mead, the village associated with Miss Marple. Even though the novel was published earlier than *The Murder at the Vicarage*, Christie's *Autobiography* (2011) does not reveal any intentional influences or connections between the two works or any other Miss Marple story.

Ayim's discussion of gossip. After she compares it to Pierce's notion of scientific inquiry, she sees it as a means of inquiry similar to the process applied in scientific research (Ayim 1994, 88). In order to utilize the technique properly, the investigative gossipers "select when to listen and whom to listen to" (Ayim 1994, 90) while simultaneously testing their theories against the acquired evidence (Ayim 1994, 91).

Miss Marple's capability to decode the patterns in human nature therefore leads her to the truthful results of her inquiry. Although the experience is gained by living in the same village for years and the role of community does represent an essential feature in Miss Marple stories, she is not limited by the closed circle of St Mary Mead's residents. In spite of the existing claims that Miss Marple, as an investigating figure, fits primarily to the English countryside (Snell 2011, 34), the readers are reminded of the contrary in *A Caribbean Mystery*. Having left the established relationships between her fellow villagers and her native country, Miss Marple finds the personality prototypes just as accurate as in the British village (Christie 2002, 31).

In connection with detective fiction written by Christie, spinsterhood has been thoroughly studied through the lens of gender. The power of the experience that comes with old age is nevertheless possessed by elderly male characters as well. Mr Satterthwaite, an amateur detective figure in *The Mysterious Mr Quin* (1984), is a seasoned gentleman whose involvement in other people's affairs is fuelled by curiosity. With his "oddly elflike" (Christie 1984, 1) appearance, he silently judges events that unfold before his eyes like drama. Much like Miss Marple, he primarily follows his instincts. However, he does not act on his own accord – it is Mr Quin who initially sets him on the path of detection. A mysterious man who suddenly appears and vanishes to give Satterthwaite directions recognizes the potential of the old man to uncover past secrets. Michael Cook accentuates the almost supernatural presence of Mr Quin and describes the connection between them:

It is significant that Christie chooses to make Quin the ghost, the essence of preternaturalness and intuition, whose observations seem all-knowing and miraculous. Satterthwaite, on the other hand, has a style that is earthbound; he is a man who uses the tools given to him, once the intuitive leap is made. (Cook 2014, 97)

Despite their undeniable successes, both Mr Satterthwaite and Miss Marple

approach their quest for the truth with modesty, which not only further proves their wisdom, but also results from experiencing ageing itself. The awareness of their own limits gives them the strength to accept themselves in their old age and the true state of the world. Acceptance enables them to live in harmony with the truth, which is an ability lacking in the other stages of life.

Christie also explores the struggles that the elderly population has to face daily due to their advanced age. Regarding old ladies, it is a fact that their judgment is questioned. For instance, that is the case of Elspeth McGillicuddy in *4.50 from Paddington*, who witnesses a murder committed on a train. Subsequently, she approaches her friend Marple and asks for help. Contrary to Elspeth and Miss Marple's expectations, the body is not discovered the following morning. As a result, the validity of Elspeth's words is doubted by the police officers. Although not entirely dismissed, the testimony is, on several occasions, considered inaccurate, fuelled by fantasies and influenced by crime novels. As illustrated by the discussion between Inspector Bacon and the Chief Constable, Christie stresses that age, rather than any other characteristics, is the reason one is not being taken seriously:

As far as all that goes, I dare say it's just make-believe - sort of thing old ladies do make up, like seeing flying saucers at the bottom of the garden, and Russian agents in the lending library. (Christie 2016, 74)

It is only after Marple's insider Lucy finally discovers the body that the pursuit of justice finally earns credibility in the official circles. The elderly characters also cannot escape feelings of isolation. Mr Satterthwaite especially avoids groups of young people, as he does not share the same values as they do. He does not participate in the drama between the characters, and, in "The Coming of Mr Quin," first speaks only after being addressed by Mr Quin. Charlotte Beyer suggests that "[h]e remains a marginalized figure, until he steps in able to solve the mystery, but it is his outsider position that enables him to see and understand" (Beyer 2016, 71). In the post-war Miss Marple novels, the spinster feels the divide between her and the younger generations due to the changing world around her. This is described by Snell, who sees her as "in her place but out of her time" (Snell 2010, 36). One of the moments where it is apparent is when she observes the village in *The Mirror Crack'd from Side to Side* (1986):

St Mary Mead was not the place it had been. ... You could blame the war (both the wars), or the younger generation, or women going out to work, or the atom bomb, or just the Government – but what one really meant was the simple fact that one was growing old. (Christie 1986a, 2)

Later, Miss Marple can solve the mystery behind Heather Badcock's poisoning. She recognizes that even after all this time, her human nature method still applies. By seeing the parallels between Heather and Alison Wilde, Marple understands that while the world might have changed, human nature and all its weaknesses are still the same.

### **Those Who See**

Unlike the younger generations, Christie's old characters are highly attentive to their surroundings. Miss Marple's additional advantage lies in her inconspicuousness. It is connected to her character as a spinster, which demonstrates "the dialectic between seeing and being seen, omniscience and invisibility" (Mezei 2007, 104). Mr Satterthwaite's method of investigation relies primarily on the observation of people as well. In "The Coming of Mr Quin", he notices a detail usually overlooked by men his age – Mrs Portal's hair is dyed. Considering the short story collection was first published in 1930, such a fact suggests either a change in her identity or efforts to conceal something in her past, which proves to be the core of the whole mystery. Later, Mr Satterthwaite is the only one aware of Mrs Portal eavesdropping on the conversation between him, Alec Portal, and the others.

Furthermore, he pays close attention to her physical reactions to the content of the discussion. However, he discloses the observation from everyone else before making a final judgment. Beyer argues that Mr Satterthwaite is exceptional due to his ability of "seeing differently" (Beyer 2016, 74). In an attempt to understand the character of others with nothing more than listening and looking closely, it appears as if he tried to create a mental connection between them and himself. After Satterthwaite sees her unusual paleness, he senses that Mrs Portal may be in trouble. As a result, he prevents Mrs Portal from committing suicide. This is not the last moment when his observant nature saves an innocent life.

Nonetheless, Christie's works do not restrict the gift of seeing solely to the

two notorious characters. On the contrary, her texts accentuate the relationship between what are seemingly hidden and elderly figures, who can look truth in its face. Regardless of their ailing health and the constant changes in modern society, these elderly characters remain deeply connected with their surroundings. Not only do they notice even the slightest change in spaces they have occupied for years, but they also actively seek updates on relationships shaping their immediate community. The mind they possess is on high alert, ready not only to see but also perceive and process the world around them. It is a quality such as this that aligns them with the journey towards the truth, and, additionally, what makes them become the obstacle for the murderer.

In 4.50 from *Paddington*, Mrs McGillicuddy unexpectedly finds herself on such a journey. When travelling by train, it does not escape the sight of the old lady that another train is approaching, running in parallel with hers. As one of the window blinds lifts, it reveals the back of a man strangling a blonde woman. Chris Ewers emphasizes the importance of the train's speed in "Genre in Transit: Agatha Christie, Trains, and the Whodunit" (2016). According to his observations, the two trains create a static moment, as if time stopped and allowed the scene to happen (Ewers 2016, 103). Elspeth, an elderly outsider in the modern, fast-paced times, is not absorbed in the "usual blur of onrushing trains" (Ewers 2016, 103). Instead, she takes the time to observe the passing scenery. Elspeth's presence of mind in that one crucial moment is what sets the action into motion. Even though her role may be attributed to a coincidence, in her thoughts she believes that it was her destiny to be at the right place at the right moment: "If the blind of the carriage had not happened to fly up... But that, of course, was Providence" (Christie 2016, 8). There is a feeling of duty which she cannot ignore despite her own travel plans. Since it is not within her powers to interfere with the situation itself (Ewers 2016, 104), she wishes to contribute by her testimony to uncover the truth – fully aware that she is the only one who can do that.

The murderer continuously disregards the danger that the two ladies pose for him. After Elspeth answers Marple's calling to fulfil her duty once again, she arrives at Rutherford Hall. Miss Marple pretends to choke on a bone, thus putting her suspect in the same position as the murderer on the train. Consequently, he is recognized by Mrs McGillicuddy. Unaware of the witness, he underestimates Miss Marple's sharp mind and falls into her trap. The well-calculated, detailed plan crumbles due to Elspeth keeping her eyes open, seeing what nobody else could.

Similarly, the presence of the retired Major Palgrave on the island of St

Honoré causes the criminal's downfall in *A Caribbean Mystery*. Widowed and with no immediate family, Palgrave connects with the outside world by means of telling stories. He may be seen carrying around a stack of photographs in his wallet, readily providing his fellow guests at the Golden Palm resort with the history behind each of them. Most of the snapshots were taken at locations like Kenya, where Palgrave spent several years. One of them was, however, obtained via his social network as a gift from a doctor at the club. The medic coincidentally took a picture of a man whose wife committed suicide. The circumstances of the incident were rather suspicious. With the help of another doctor, it is revealed that a similar case occurred again and that the man in the photograph is a serial wife killer who likely committed both crimes. Major Palgrave now keeps the snapshot and poses a rather daring question to Miss Marple: "Like to see the picture of a murderer?" (Christie 2002, 19). Miss Marple immediately understands it has become a part of "his repertoire of stories" (Christie 2002, 19), since it is evident that it "had been worked up a good deal in repeated telling" (Christie 2002, 19). At the end of the conversation, Palgrave pauses for a while, stares over Marple's right shoulder and freezes because he recognizes the man among the guests at the Golden Palm resort. Unfortunately, his gaze meets the eyes of the murderer, and he pays for the exchange of stories with his life.

Miss Marple identifies Palgrave as a typical retired major, "[a]n elderly man who needed a listener so that he could, in memory, relive the days in which he had been happy" (Christie 2002, 10). The photograph itself represents more than a mere old man's natural curiosity. His obsession with it shows that, to him, they are special objects of attachment. In general, possessions bear significance for the plot in detective fiction, as they provide additional layers to the characters connected with the crime (Mills 2016, 29). The same applies to Palgrave, whose interest in photographs is fuelled by feelings of nostalgia. Reminiscences of the past are his only reason to keep the snapshots for all these years. Although it results in his death, such a tendency of his transmits the information to Miss Marple, which proves to be essential in solving not only his murder, but also crimes from the past and near future.

Instead of disbelief, Palgrave faces the lack of interest of the other guests. Initially, this includes Miss Marple herself, as she is unable to listen attentively. Palgrave's death is dismissed as a natural occurrence due to his age. He is quickly forgotten and life on the island continues as if nothing had happened, showing the seeming insignificance of an elderly man:



Life here was sunshine, sea, and social pleasures. A grim visitor had interrupted these activities, casting a momentary shadow, but the shadow was now gone. After all, nobody had known the deceased very well. (Christie 2002, 51)

Some even express their relief – the superstitious Señora de Caspearo believes Palgrave's "evil eye" (Christie 2002, 214) brought bad luck to the island. The mention of the glass eye, reminiscent of the wounds in war, makes Miss Marple realize that, in fact, Major Palgrave was looking in a different direction since he could not see with the glass eye. Due to what he had seen, Marple and Rafiel are able to save the life of the intended future victim. In the end, Palgrave became one of the most significant participants in the series of events that began many years ago. He also earns a place in Miss Marple's memory:

As one grew older, ... one got more and more into the habit of listening; listening possibly without any great interest, but there had been between her and the major the gentle give and take of two old people. It had had a cheerful, human quality. She did not actually mourn Major Palgrave but she missed him. (Christie 2002, 52)

Miss Marple's achievement to prevent a crime in *A Caribbean Mystery* represents a ground breaking point in the development of her character, leading to the later events in *Nemesis* (1988).

### Those Who Remember

The next section explores the elderly in correlation with memory and the past. *Towards Zero* introduces the idea of the zero hour, in other words, the moment of the murder. The roots of the act, though, lie in a distant past. Mr Treves, a retired solicitor and criminologist, criticizes detective fiction's structure as it begins with the crime itself. He says that "[a] murder is the culmination of a lot of different circumstances, all converging at a given moment at a given point" (Christie 1991, 206).

Searching for the truth in the past is therefore the detective's task. Time keeps on passing, which the murderers may use to their advantage. To purposefully

hide the truth, they rely on the fact that nobody remembers what happened and there is nobody left to care about the said events. In a world where everyone expects the future without looking back, there are the elderly who were present at the time. Because of their outsider position in the events – as neighbours, servants, or mere bystanders – the culprit is not even aware of their existence. But the old people carry their memories like a treasure and are more than happy to share them with others. Without their recollections, the clues would never be discovered, and there would be no starting point for the investigation. It is their memory that protects the truth as it is from being twisted in anybody's favour.

Christie focuses on the significance of memory in *Elephants Can Remember*. The crime committed in the novel is regarded as a fading moment in the past. It might have caused a sensation when it made the headlines at the time, but the rest of the world moved on without waiting for definite answers. Not as much for Mrs Burton-Cox. Her son is engaged to the daughter of a married couple who was found shot on the edge of a cliff. While wild theories, including a suicide pact, circulated among the public, Mrs Burton-Cox wishes to know the truth. Celia, the future bride, is secretly troubled by unanswered questions about the incident. The detective figures in the text are Ariadne Oliver, Celia's godmother, and Hercule Poirot. Mrs Oliver, first repulsed by Mrs Burton-Cox's request to revisit the case, serves as the interrogator of the elephants, as she calls those who remember events from the distant past (Christie 2011b, 34). Even though Mrs Oliver admits to not having a close bond with Celia, as she is also one of her many goddaughters whom she barely sees throughout the years, Ariadne remembers sharing mutual acquaintances with the victims. She assembles their contacts from her address book and tries to reconstruct who might have been present in the area when the suspicious tragedy took place.

Kate M. Quinn sees memory as one of the fundamental tropes of the crime genre, exploring the relationship between the memories themselves and the way one's own recollections may change over time (Quinn 2020, 310). Considering the detection itself relies on what the investigator learns from past witnesses or suspects, the question of reliability is of the essence here (Quinn 2020, 311). Since many years have already passed, Mrs Oliver assesses the value of information given to her based on the elephant's personality.

*Elephants Can Remember* presents to the readers an intriguing solution to the issue of recollection. Unexpectedly, solving the complicated case of suicide and murder does not require the memories of Mrs Oliver's elephants to be as fresh

as years ago. Instead, she realizes that there are fragments of the truth in their memories, which represent the missing pieces needed to fill in the blanks. Whether it is the old grumpy Julia Carstairs or a retired nanny, they contribute with crucial information about Celia's mother Margaret, for instance her habit of wearing wigs, her sister being admitted to a mental hospital, or a former love triangle between Margaret, her twin sister Dorothea, and her husband. A crucial indicator of the truth appears when recollections of the elephants seem to contradict one another. While some of them remember how fond the dog was of Margaret, others report its aggressive behaviour, resulting in her having scars from its bites (Christie 2011b, 128). Owing to the elderly elephants, the preserved knowledge of the past clears the name of Celia and her husband.

In *Towards Zero*, the memory of Mr Treves alters not only his fate but also a fate of an extraordinary love square. As he finds himself at a dinner in Lady Tressillian's house, complicated relationships between the guests create a tense atmosphere. Here, among his companions, he recognizes a child murderer whom he encountered years ago as a criminologist. The eighty-year-old man proceeds to tell a story about the culprit without mentioning the gender. Mentally unstable and full of jealousy, the child planned the crime for vengeance. Although the police treated the case like an accident, Treves suspects otherwise. He remembers that the murderer possessed a specific physical feature. The culprit lives free somewhere in the world, but the old man remembers and would identify the peculiarity anywhere (Christie 1991, 92). His recollection leads to death, as the said murderer forges a placard informing about a lift being out of order. Indirectly orchestrated by the culprit, the result is that the old man's weak heart in combination with alcohol causes his demise. Mr Treves is momentarily defeated by means of his frail body.

Despite the suspicions, the police are not alerted, once again, on the basis of his poor health and age. The guests sense that there is a meaning behind the story, but initially, they decide not to reflect on it, as is shown by Thomas Royde's reaction: "I don't see that it's relevant in any way. It's not as though Treves were alive and could tell them anything" (Christie 1991, 178). Most importantly, this is precisely how the murderer feels. There is no more danger from Treves, and preparations for the upcoming crimes may resume. Nonetheless, the criminologist's legacy prevails as the story finally reaches the investigators in the novel, Superintendent Battle, Inspector Leach, and an amateur sleuth Angus MacWhirter. In the end, they are able to identify the culprit based on the physical peculiarity and prevent

the zero hour – his initial goal to frame an innocent person for murder.

### Guardians of the Truth

It is no coincidence that Mr Treves recounts the story in the circle of Lady Tressillian's guests. As an intellectual and experienced man, he is fully aware of the dangerous nature of the knowledge that he has (Christie 1991, 9). Thomas Royde and Mary Aldin later realize what his aim was – to confront the murderer face to face and, additionally, to warn him against any possible action in the future. That is supported in the narrative passages, where he is described as expressing himself in a slow manner, “apparently choosing his words with great deliberation and care” (Christie 1991, 91). On the night of his death, Treves concludes the story by questioning if the child “still got a murderer's heart” (Christie 1991, 92). Whether or not he was ready to take further action is never revealed to the readers, but the story itself manifests the bravery of an elderly man such as Treves. He is determined to fight for the truth despite the danger. Such an act, therefore, transforms him into a guardian whose protection of what is right and true is not broken even after his death.

The role of the guardian is elevated to a new level via Miss Marple in *Nemesis* and the preceding events in *A Caribbean Mystery*. Lacking the support of her English allies, the spinster finds herself in a desperate situation. Once she takes the decisive step to intervene, she realizes that there is nobody to take immediate action, which is necessary. Solving the mystery no longer represents a game or a puzzle. Instead, it becomes a battle between good and evil, and it nearly transcends into a spiritual dimension. In the moments of tension, the readers witness Marple's prayer-like state of mind: “Miss Marple, feeling rather like a humble deputy of the Almighty, almost cried aloud her need in Biblical phrasing. *Who will go for me? Whom shall I send?*” (Christie 2002, 162). Finally, it is the wealthy Mr Rafiel who helps the old lady with her quest after she calls herself *Nemesis*, a goddess of retribution, expressing her anger towards the deceitful murderer.

In *Nemesis*, she learns about Mr Rafiel's passing and is deeply affected since their alliance against evil was so meaningful. Soon after, she receives a letter written by Rafiel before his death. He asks the elderly lady to embark on a quest to save an innocent life and arranges for her journey along with the suspects of murder. Mr Quin's guidance of Mr Satterthwaite is similar to how Marple

perceives the directions given to her by Rafiel. The influential man even arranges for her the protection of two female bodyguards in disguise, whom Marple calls her "guardian angels" (Christie 1988, 202). The task is never further specified, leaving the old lady in a situation where she first needs to identify the crime and subsequently tries to be the bearer of justice. As noticed by J. C. Bernthal, it is purposeful that the victim's name is revealed to be Verity Hunt, as Miss Marple brings the "scriptural promise of ultimate judgment from a higher source" (Bernthal 2019, 176). Her bravery is tested in the moment of confrontation. She refuses to drink poisoned milk, which is prepared for her by the culprit and served with a façade of heartfelt service. Miss Marple does not crumble in a moment of crisis and calls the two bodyguards to her aid before the murderer manages to attack.

In contrast to her harmless appearance, the inner strength of the elderly woman does not flinch even when directly facing evil. Frequently described as "woolly and fluffy" (Christie 2016, 138), Miss Marple overcomes all obstacles of her age and fulfils her role as the avenger of the unjustly accused. As much as she may seem inconspicuous, her expertise in guarding the untouchability of the truth makes her a formidable opponent. Christie herself admits to not approaching the character ambitiously at first: "Miss Marple insinuated herself so quietly into my life that I hardly noticed her arrival" (Christie 2011a, 435). However, her potential kept on growing until it reached its final development. *Nemesis* thus portrays Miss Marple's journey as the final success of an ageing character who fights not only against the forces of evil but also the prejudice of society and one's own limitations. She represents the ultimate triumph of all undervalued elders utilized in Christie's fiction.

Compared with other detective figures by the same author, Miss Marple's happy ending appears to be everlasting. The rewards for providing the solution are numerous, including the twenty thousand pounds promised by Mr Rafiel. When she shares her plans to "have some fun" (Christie 1988, 221) with the money, she reminds Mr Schuster of a giggling young girl. Thus, Miss Marple is metaphorically given her youth back for a moment. And finally, on behalf of the other elderly characters tirelessly guarding the truth, she earns well-deserved respect. The way she impresses those who previously doubted her might be demonstrated in her last in-person meeting with Mr Rafiel:

He took her hand.

'*Ave Caesar, nos morituri te salutamus,*' he said.

'I'm afraid,' said Miss Marple, 'I don't know very much Latin.'

'But you understand that?'

'Yes.' She said no more. She knew quite well what he was telling her. (Christie 2002, 287)

## Conclusion

The elderly characters in the selected works above demonstrate that, in order to fight for the truth, one sometimes requires knowledge and skills, which may be acquired solely by years of experience. Despite the constraints inflicted on them by their own ageing body and isolation from younger generations, who either disregard their value or belittle them, the elderly become the last remaining resistance against evil and the key to solving the mystery. Miss Marple's universally applicable patterns of behaviour show that unlike the world, human nature seems unchanged. Mr Satterthwaite, Mrs McGillicuddy and Major Palgrave keep their eyes wide open and thus see what other people cannot. On the other hand, the truth is protected from alterations by the memory of the elephants and Mr Treves, whose presence the murderer does not anticipate. With their memory and the use of experienced observation, the elderly characters, both male and female, each accept the role of the guardian. Considering how unpleasant and potentially risky that is, their resolve is crucial for their portrayal as the protectors. In their own way, they decide not to stay idle. They either get involved in the detection of a crime or intervene in the events to ensure the future punishment of the criminal. Nevertheless, their role in a crime narrative culminates with Miss Marple's transformation into Nemesis. As the goddess of divine retribution, she is the embodiment of the final victory of an elderly character in Christie's detective fiction.

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