

## Agatha Christie : A Life Narrative

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Always dismissed as the “slow one” of the Miller family, she was an inarticulate child who liked keeping things to herself rather than airing her knowledge. “Agatha doesn’t like parting with information” was the popular family joke (*Autobiography* 106). Agatha Christie’s early childhood was overshadowed by her brilliant, vivacious sister Madge and her mother Clara, who had the gift of making even the most trivial things appear interesting, and whose “thoughts dart(ed) with the swiftness of swallows in flight” (*Autobiography* 19).

She was a lonely child, as her brother Monty and sister Madge, were older to her by ten and eleven years respectively. She was left very much to her own devices with her world revolving round the calm, serene, imperturbable figure of her dear ‘Nursie’. This gave her free rein to indulge her imagination to the fullest, in creating make-believe games and playmates, like ‘The Kittens’ who were named ‘Clover’ and ‘Blackie’ with a mother called ‘Mrs. Benson’. Then there was ‘Mrs. Green’ with a hundred children, the important ones among whom were ‘Poodle’, ‘Squirrel’ and ‘Tree’. All these find a mention in the childhood experiences of Vernon Deyre in *Giant’s Bread*. Her later day imaginary companions were ‘the girls’ whose life she continued to plan, well into her advanced years, though subconsciously, because she had made them so much a part of her life.

The terrifying game, ‘The Elder Sister’, that Madge played with her, pretending that they both had an elder sibling who, though like Madge in appearance, was a little mad and could turn up at any moment to torture Agatha, would fill her with an ‘indescribable terror’ but at the same time thrilled her to her very core. She thus realized from an early age, the secret pleasure, that humans derive from any kind of horror. “Why did I *like* being frightened? What instinctive need is satisfied by terror?...Is it because something rebels in one against the life that is too *safe*? Is a certain amount of danger in life a need of human beings?” (*Autobiography* 54).

So sheltered a life did she live, that the ‘first real sorrow of her life’ is described as the retiring of her beloved Nursie. The very real anxiety of the dwindling trust funds, left by her paternal grandfather, Nathaniel Miller, was camouflaged by a shift to the South of France, for a brief sojourn, letting their dear home Ashfield on rent, as the cost of living abroad was paradoxically lesser than keeping up one’s own house. The five year old Agatha regarded this as a high adventure because here she, for the first time, came across that brand new mode of travel – ‘The Automobiles’. However, the great Pyrenees failed to come up to her expectations of how high mountains should appear and she designates them as “one of the great disappointments of her life” (*Autobiography* 70).

Her father’s untimely death, due to pressing financial worries, was a real threat to her secure lifestyle. Though the Millers were not rich, yet they had a comfortable middle-class home life with the usual assortment of domestic servants, headed by the

exemplary cook, Jane Rowe, who could rustle up five course dinners for seven or eight people, without turning a hair. Though Christie has sometimes been criticized for her snobbish attitude, she highly valued trained domestic staff. As she writes in her autobiography, "One of the things I think I should miss most, if I were a child nowadays, would be the absence of servants. To a child they were the most colourful part of daily life....They 'knew their place', as was said, but knowing their place meant not subservience but pride, the pride of the professional" (28). Many of her earlier books have a multitude of characters in domestic roles, some able, some not so able but all smoothing out the problems in domestic life, and her later day books bemoan the lack of servants in the post war period.

Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller, born on September 15, 1890 in Torquay, in England was thus born in the languid, leisurely, complacent Victorian era of British aristocracy. Her father, Frederick Alvah Miller, was an easygoing, pleasant American, settled in England, who didn't work for a living because in those days of independent incomes, he didn't need to and so wasn't expected to either. Agatha realized that by the modern standards he would be judged a lazy man but she remembers him as having the 'quality of agreeableness' which is so difficult to find. Her mother, Clara Boehmer, had been adopted by her mother's wealthy sister, Margaret Miller, who was also Frederick's stepmother. In consequence, she was utterly sensitive and vulnerable, suffering from a feeling of being unwanted, and had right from her childhood, romantically devoted herself to her 'cousin Frederick' who was ten years her senior. "They achieved that very rare production, a happy marriage" (*Autobiography* 14). The pain of being unwanted is voiced by Maureen Summerhayes, "My mother parted with me and I had every advantage, as they call it. And it's always hurt – always – always – to know that you weren't really wanted, that your mother could let you go" (*Mrs. McGinty's Dead* 182).

Agatha became very close to her mother after her father's death. Her over-active imagination was a source of agony to her at this point of her life. She confesses that her father's unexpected death had made her so vulnerable and insecure, that she sometimes, for hours at a stretch, would stand outside her mother's room, at night, until she was reassured, on hearing her mother's snores, that she was very much alive. Madge soon got married to James Watt. Monty, the ne'er do well son, was more or less one of 'nature's misfits' as was proved time and again. He had fought in the Boer War and later was invalided from East Africa, and the burden of looking after his upkeep fell on his sisters, as long as he lived. "...a woman came to call at the house one day,...Richards sent shots to the right and left of her as she was going away, walking down the drive. She bolted like a hare, he said. He roared with laughter when he told us about it. I remember him saying her fat backside was quivering like a jelly" (*The Unexpected Guest* 23). Here Richard seems to be an expression of Monty's eccentricity.

Agatha was not sent to school as she had already learnt to read from the tender age of five, all by herself, to Clara's chagrin. Madge had been to school and later on, to a finishing school in Paris. She had been recommended for higher education but Frederick shuddered at the thought of his daughter as a bluestocking. Clara herself developed some disparaging notions about schooling so that Agatha was deprived from any kind of formal schooling. Instead she had some lessons at home from her

mother and father. Later she went to a girls' school in Torquay for two days a week, in case, her mother felt belatedly, she may miss out on education. Agatha enjoyed mathematics, "There's something heavenly about numbers" (*The Moving Finger* 36). Then she was bundled off to Paris, to a pensionnat, where she enjoyed piano lessons. However, she accepted the bitter truth that no matter how hard she tried, she would never become a professional pianist and later on in life, analysed quite dispassionately:

There are people who can perform in public much better than they perform in private; and there are people who are just the opposite. I was one of the latter. It is obvious that I chose the right career. The most blessed thing about being an author is that you do it in private and in your own time...you do not have to stand up and make a fool of yourself in public" (*Autobiography* 158).

Somewhat similar views are expressed by Ariadne Oliver, the author figure, created by Agatha, who is believed to be her mouthpiece. "What a mistake for an author to emerge from her secret fastness. Authors were shy unsociable creatures, atoning for their lack of social aptitude by inventing their own companions and conversations" (Christie, Mrs. McGinty's Dead 127). Mrs. Oliver relies totally on her woman's intuition (which usually proves out to be incorrect) and her long held belief is, "Now if a woman was the head of Scotland Yard-" (Mrs. McGinty's Dead, 127). Further she has a penchant for eating apples which are always to be found in her vicinity. In another Christie novel, *Cards on the Table*, she seems to be reflecting Agatha's views when she explains the process of literary creation :

One actually has to think, you know. And thinking is always such a bore. And you have to plan things. And then one gets stuck every now and then, and then you think you'll never get out of the mess - but you do ! Writing's not particularly enjoyable. It's hard work like everything else (131).

Due to financial constraints, Agatha could not have a proper London Season when she had to formally 'come out' in society, so her mother took her out to Cairo for three months, on the pretext of her convalescence, but actually to initiate her shy, gauche daughter into society, that too, at an affordable cost. The young, pretty girl was kept busy attending five dances a week and engaging in the 'popular Victorian games of flirting and courting'. Despite receiving some proposals, the marriage banns did not go up then.

It was much later that she was swept off her feet by the handsome, intense pilot of the newly appointed Royal Flying Corps, Archibald Christie. There seemed insurmountable difficulties in this match because of paucity of funds to set up a household, on both sides. The marriage was finally solemnized on Christmas Eve, in 1914 after the outbreak of the 1st World War.

Agatha served as a VAD (Voluntary Aid Detachment) in the war. Though a novice at the job, she soon overcame her nervousness and became quite adept in the task of nursing the wounded soldiers. She declared that she would have liked to take up nursing as a full time career as there was something very satisfying about it. But after a bad bout of flu, she was shifted to work in the dispensary, where she acquired a vast knowledge of poisons, which later proved to be so useful to her in her writing. Further, with time on her hands now, she conceived the idea of writing a detective story. Ever

since Madge had challenged her that “I bet you couldn’t” (*Autobiography* 217) the thought of proving her sister wrong had been nagging at the back of her mind. After suffering rejection at the hands of a long line of publishers, The Bodley Head finally published *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920 and thus was born Agatha Christie, The Author, The ‘Queen of Crime’.

This book also marked the beginning of the existence of the world famous, know-all detective Hercule Poirot, with his egg shaped head, large mustaches, a somewhat comic appearance and those deadly ‘little grey cells’ which were to become so enduringly appealing to all readers of detective fiction. He is a retired member of the Belgian Police Force, based on some Belgian refugees who had taken refuge in Torquay, in war time. ‘Order and Method’ are his watchwords. Unlike Holmes, he mocks at the notion of a ‘human bloodhound’ who appropriates outrageous disguises and concentrates solely on the physical clues. His lack of modesty, his habit of twisting the truth and sometimes, even stooping to read other people’s personal correspondence, greatly outrage his very correct, old school tie, English friend, Captain Hastings, who keeps remonstrating with him that, “It isn’t playing the game”. Poirot always reminds him, “I am not playing a game, mon ami. I am hunting down a murderer” (*Peril at End House* 131). He firmly believes that the general opinion about him is, “That is Hercule Poirot. The great – The unique !- There was never anyone like him, there never will be!” (*Peril at End House* 8). He and his own personal ‘Watson’ would one day achieve so much popularity was beyond the wildest imagination of Agatha herself.

Agatha started her married life with Archie soon after, trying to settle down in London. Here she got an opportunity to indulge in her new passion of house hunting and collecting houses, which eventually, many years later, culminated in her possessing about half a dozen houses at one time, the most loved ones being Winterbrook House at Wallingford, Greenway House (the house of her dreams) and 48, Sheffield Terrace, which was the only house which had a private sanctuary for Agatha- the author, where she could peacefully get on with her work. Otherwise, she is believed to have worked wherever she could, in her innumerable ‘notebooks’, with plots for one book confined not to one, but to several of them simultaneously. Her passion gets reflected in “*Endless Night...* and in *Hallowe’en Party*”. There are “literal representations of Greenway in *Five Little Pigs* and *Dead Man’s Folly*” (Thompson 311).

Her daughter, Rosalind, was born on August 5<sup>th</sup>, 1919. Agatha describes her pregnancy as “a nine-month ocean voyage to which you never got acclimatized” and after the birth what she felt most grateful for was “I don’t feel sick any more. How wonderful!” (*Autobiography* 274). As disclosed quite candidly in her semi-autobiographical novel *Unfinished Portrait*, Agatha as Celia, remembers Archie’s reaction on hearing the news of her pregnancy, “I don’t want a baby. You’ll think of it all the time and not of me....Women do. They’re forever being domestic and messing about with a baby. They forget their husbands altogether” (501).

Agatha, blissfully enmeshed in her married life, went on a world tour, with Archie as the financial advisor of the British Empire Mission, organized by his old schoolmaster at Clifton, Major Belcher. Even though it was ‘a terrible risk’ to throw up Archie’s safe city job, the Christies were keen to take that risk. “...if you can’t take the

risk of doing something you want, when the chances come, life isn't worth living...and now we were determined to see the world and risk what would happen on our return" (*Autobiography* 296). After comfortably settling Rosalind and her Nurse, with Clara and Madge, at Ashfield, Agatha embarked on the year round world tour and she happily wrote in her autobiography, "Going round the world was one of the most exciting things that ever happened to me" (298). They visited S. Africa, Australia, New Zealand which she found "the most beautiful country", Honolulu, Canada and then onto New York.

The saddest period of Agatha's life started with the death of her beloved mother, Clara. After this enormous loss, what remained was the practical problem of clearing up Ashfield which fell entirely on her shoulders. Reliving the memories over and over again, caused her to get 'confused and muddled over things', unusually weepy with 'a terrible sense of loneliness' and short terms of memory loss when she sometimes couldn't recall her own name. The situation became worse when Archie finally condescended to make an appearance at Ashfield, and on seeing him again, Agatha felt her old 'gunman' nightmare materializing. Her fear of looking at her closest friend and instead finding a stranger in his place, was proving to be true. Archie, with a slight hesitation, declared his intention of getting a divorce from Agatha so as to get married to Nancy Neele. He very conveniently blamed Agatha for pushing him away from her life, "I did tell you once, long ago, that I hate it when people are ill or unhappy – it spoils everything for me....I can't stand not having what I want, and I can't stand not being happy" (*Autobiography* 362-363). Despite all her efforts to make him change his mind she had to agree to the divorce, at the end of one year.

What ensued in this one year remains one of the greatest mysteries surrounding Agatha – her eleven day disappearance act in 1926. The facts state that late one night she drove away from home without telling anyone. Her car was found abandoned on the green slopes of Newlands Corner, where she may, for a while, have contemplated suicide. From there she walked to Chilworth station, reached London, posted a letter to her brother-in-law, Campbell Christie, and then took a train to Harrogate. She then registered herself as Mrs. Teresa Neele of Cape Town, at the Hydro Hotel, where she spent the next eleven days.

There was a wide-scale search for the missing author. Newspapers got on the scent and the police became actively involved. Quite a number of people voluntarily took up the search for her or for her dead body, as it was considered a strong possibility that either she had committed suicide or had been murdered by her husband. Finally, Archie Christie managed to locate Agatha at the Hydro, where some band members had recognized her from her photographs published in the newspapers. Next day Archie, with the help of Madge and her husband James Watt, secretly shepherded off Agatha to Abney Hall, the Watts Residence, to protect her from the persistent hounding of the press. The official verdict that had been released, was that of Agatha having suffered a short term memory loss and thus absolved completely from any blame whatsoever.

Many theories abound as to the what and wherefore of the disappearance. Some people felt deceived after Agatha's recovery, as they regarded it as some kind of a

publicity stunt. Many considered that it was mere spite on Agatha's part as she deliberately assumed the surname of Archie's mistress, in order to bring discredit to both Archie and Nancy Neele by making their affair public. While others, like Andrew Norman, firmly believe that Agatha was actually suffering from a form of amnesia 'psychogenic amnesia and fugue state' (106) where all symptoms displayed by her can well be explained by this medical condition. Laura Thompson, one of the sympathizers of Agatha, takes the view that Agatha was making a last attempt to recover Archie by making him realize her importance, by her absence. She registered herself by the name of Neele as a clue that would point her whereabouts to him, in addition to the letter she had written and posted beforehand to Campbell Christie, informing him of her intention of going to some spa in Yorkshire for a brief respite. She must have hoped that putting two and two together, Archie would come anxiously looking for her and all would be well after the reconciliation.

Agatha's disappearance had been blown so much out of proportion and became a subject to so much speculation, that she felt it hard to live it down for many years to come. The subject was always a taboo in her presence. In her autobiography too she is completely reticent about this episode in her life. Though the only way in which she refers to it, is to say :

I had felt like a fox, hunted, my earths dug up and yelping hounds following me everywhere. I had always hated notoriety of any kind, and now I had had such a dose of it that at some moments I felt I could hardly bear to go on living (364).

In the aftermath of this disastrous event, five weeks thereafter, Agatha was compelled to give a divorce to Archie who refused to forgive her for putting him through so much and splashing his personal life all over the newspapers. Thus Clara's misgivings about Archie finally proved correct as she had always known him to be 'ruthless'.

For Agatha, it was a devastating experience. She held old-fashioned views about marriage and till the very last, clung to the hope, that Archie would one day come back to her and Rosalind and thus, divorce was never an option for her. She felt guilty on not having been successful at making her marriage work, for the sake of Rosalind. "Whenever I look at my daughter, I feel still that I ought to have stood out, that I ought perhaps to have refused....To break up a marriage is wrong - I am sure of it -" (Autobiography 365). Dr. Franklin in *Curtain : Poirot's Last Case* echoes Agatha's sentiments on divorce, "One assumed certain responsibilities. Those must be carried through and not shirked or set aside. A [marriage] contract... is a contract. One enters upon it of one's own free will, and must abide by it" (185).

By this time Agatha had started making a name for herself, when her few published books had sold well, the most successful being *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* in 1926, where she incorporated the idea of turning the 'Watson' into the murderer. She had bought a 'grey bottle nosed Morris-Cowley' on the suggestion of Archie, which she regarded as one of the high points of her existence, on par with another of her dream coming true - of "dining with the Queen at Buckingham Palace" about forty years later (Autobiography 331).

*The Murder at the Vicarage*, published in 1930, marked the appearance of Miss Jane Marple, the second famous Christie sleuth, who is an old spinster living in the small English village of St. Mary Mead. She is full of curiosity about her neighbours' affairs and adroitly solves baffling mysteries that happen to come her way, by drawing village parallels and relying vastly on her knowledge of human nature. Outwardly she appears a typical Victorian lady, 'prim, fluttery with placid, innocent china-blue eyes and snowy hair, a pink crinkled face' but at the same time she has 'a suspicious mind' and a 'low opinion of human conduct'. She is often heard to say, "The great thing to avoid is having in any way a trustful mind....Oh, yes, I always believe the worst. What is so sad is that one is usually justified in doing so" (*A Pocketful of Rye* 146). So often was she proved right that Sir Henry Clithering, the retired Commissioner of Metropolitan Police called her often "just the finest detective God ever made". It is believed that Agatha modelled Miss Marple on her paternal grandmother, Margaret Miller, whom she called 'Auntie-Grannie', and her friends at Ealing, who always expected the worst and were often proved right.

Agatha did not regard herself as a professional author. Middle and Upper class women hardly ever took up professions, though all that changed in the aftermath of the world wars. Writing was something she had taken up for pleasure and if, at the same time, it fetched money too, what fun indeed! But after the divorce, as a single mother, it became imperative that she should take up writing as a profession. She maybe termed 'anti-feminist' by today's standards as she held typical Victorian views about the working of women :

The position of women, over the years, has definitely changed for the worse. We women have behaved like mugs. We have clamoured to be allowed to work as men work. Men, not being fools, have taken kindly to the idea. Why support a wife? What's wrong with a wife supporting *herself*? (*Autobiography* 134).

What is more ironical is that for a woman, who made such a name for herself, by her talent for writing and the hard work she put into her books, she was all out for the 'pleasures of idleness' as she terms it. In her book *The Moving Finger*, the central character, Jerry Burton, displays a photograph of his favourite Chinese picture which 'represents an old man sitting beneath a tree playing cat's cradle with a piece of string on his fingers and toes....It is called "Old man enjoying the Pleasure of Idleness"'. It was a deep rooted conviction with Agatha that to really attain the pleasures of idleness we have to reach "a very high state of civilization...a fine point of sophistication" (*The Moving Finger* 114).

Then on an impulse, to get away from the mess she had made of her life, Agatha decided to travel, to explore new horizons. She put Rosalind in a boarding school under the guardianship of her trusted secretary cum friend Carlo - Charlotte Fisher. We get a glimpse of Rosalind's boarding school in *Cat Among the Pigeons*. On the recommendation of some friends she got reservations done on the Simplon-Orient Express to Stamboul (Istanbul) and then onto Baghdad. This forms the setting for the famous *Murder on the Orient Express*. From then on she was hooked with the magnetism of the Middle East and all through her life made frequent journeys there. It was here that she came across Max Mallowan, assistant to Leonard Woolley, the archaeologist,

heading the excavations at Ur. Max was relegated with the task of showing Agatha the various interesting sites nearby. On the way, Agatha showed herself game enough to swim in a desert lake in whatever makeshift clothes she could find. Further, when the car sunk into the sand and refused to budge, she quietly went off to sleep in whatever shelter she managed to find in the hot, scorching heat of the desert. "No fuss" was what Max admired in her and decided to marry her.

Agatha had serious misgivings about this proposal, not only because she was unwilling to risk her happiness a second time around, but also because Max was fourteen years younger to her. This caused some raised eyebrows from Madge, James Watt and also their son, Jimmy, who had been a contemporary of Max at Oxford. But on receiving a positive response from Rosalind and Carlo, Agatha and Max were quietly married in Edinburgh.

The marriage proved a happy one. Agatha shared Max's interests in archaeology. Many a times she accompanied him to his various archaeological digs in the Middle East. She proved to be a great help at the dig, cleaning the finds, scaling and drawing and in whatever capacity she could. It became a second home to her and she became quite well versed in archaeology. In fact as Max was quick to point out, "Don't you realize that at this moment you know more about pre-historic pottery than almost any woman in England?" (*Autobiography* 541). She based some of her detective books like *Appointment with Death*, *Death Comes as the End*, *Death on the Nile*, *Destination Unknown*, *Murder in Mesopotamia* and *They Came to Baghdad* in the East. She even wrote a book of memoirs *Come, Tell Me How You Live* on her life with Max in the Middle East. Her autobiography was also started in Nimrud, Iraq, finished some fifteen years later and published posthumously.

In the II<sup>nd</sup> World War, she again worked as a dispenser at University College Hospital. Max joined the Home Guard, and later the Air Ministry. Rosalind got married to Hubert Prichard, a major in the army. Greenway was taken over by the Admiralty, Wallingford was filled up with evacuees, 48 Sheffield Terrace was bombed up and Agatha had to spend her days alone in a rented flat. The bright spot of her life, at this point, was the birth of her grandson Mathew on September 21<sup>st</sup>, 1943 whom Rosalind proudly declared to be "a monster....A terrifically big baby-a real monster!" (*Autobiography* 511) and Agatha cheerfully devoted herself to looking after her daughter and grandson. The 'most cruel' thing that personally affected Agatha was the news of Hubert, reported missing, and later on killed in action, in the war. Agatha felt Rosalind to have enormous reserves of courage, as outwardly, she continued to live her life normally but what Agatha herself felt was utter helplessness:

The saddest thing in life and the hardest to live through, is the knowledge that there is someone you love very much whom you cannot save from suffering....Sometimes one cannot help a tide of rage coming over when one thinks of war....one is left with the horrible feeling now that war settles nothing; that to win a war is as disastrous as to lose one! (*Autobiography* 520).

Agatha grew very fond of her grandson whom she described as, "an enchanting little boy, and always, in my memory, such a happy little boy: he had a great knack for happiness. He still has" (*Autobiography* 520). The play, *The Mousetrap*, written on the

request of B.B.C. for a function organized for Queen Mary, was gifted to Mathew who "was always the most lucky member of the family, and it would be Mathew's gift that turned out the big money winner" (*Autobiography* 531) as it has become the longest running play in history.

The war years became the most productive years of Agatha's career. Her books were marked by a more mature outlook on life and an indepth emotional study. She wrote as many as 14 books, two finest short story collections, and two books in the Mary Westmacott series (the pseudonym she adopted for the bittersweet romances). *Absent in the Spring* was the book that she felt 'growing inside' her and about which she says it was "written with integrity, with sincerity, it was written as I meant to write it, and that is the proudest joy an author can have" (*Autobiography* 517-518). The second book, *The Rose and the Yew Tree*, is believed to be her best book in the series.

Agatha also started writing plays for the stage and film versions of her books. This caused a further leap into fame and Agatha Christie became a household name for detective fiction. Throughout the 1950s she was much engaged in the theatrical world, producing a 'Christie for Christmas' every year – the slogan advanced by her publishers, Collins. However, towards the end of her life, her plays failed to draw crowds as they had done earlier, though she herself was unable to accept it and continued on with her work, despite the vicious attacks and sharp criticisms she received. Only *The Mousetrap* continued to have a successful run. After her death her plays are still revived frequently and *The Mousetrap*, opened in 1952, continues to be performed, unceasingly, even today.

Max Mallowan was knighted in 1968 and Agatha became Lady Mallowan. She had been awarded the CBE in 1956 and felt, "...it's one up to the Low Brows!!" (Thompson 382). She was under no illusions about her literary merit and she confesses frankly in her autobiography :

If I could write like Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark or Graham Greene, I should jump to high heaven with delight, but I know that I can't...I have learnt that I am *me*, that I can do the things that, as one might put it, *me* can do, but I cannot do the things that *me* would like to do (422).

In 1971, in her eightieth year, Agatha became 'Dame Agatha', which is further proof, that no matter what criticism she received, she had undisputedly established herself. According to her publishers, Harper Collins : "She wrote over 100 novels, short story collections and plays and her books have sold over a billion copies in English and another billion in over 100 foreign languages. She has become quite simply, the best-selling novelist in history."

She held rigid views on crime and criminals. "It's not the guilty who matter. It's the innocent" (*Ordeal by Innocence* 29). She further elaborates :

I can suspend judgement on those who kill – but I think they are evil for the community; they bring in nothing except hate, and take from it all they can. I am willing to believe that they are made that way, that they are born with a disability, for which, perhaps, one should pity them; but even then, I think, not spare them....The

innocent must be protected; they must be able to live at peace and charity with their neighbours (*Autobiography* 453).

Agatha Christie passed away quietly, on a winter afternoon, on January 12<sup>th</sup>, 1976 at Winterbrook House where she had been ailing for sometime. She was buried, four days later, at St. Mary's Church, Chelsey. On her tombstone is engraved an extract from the *Faerie Queene* : 'Sleep after Toyle, Port after Stormie seas, Ease after Warre, Death after Life, Doth greatly please'.

Through the ups and downs of life, she always maintained a positive, cheerful outlook. She was not immune to the trials and tribulations of life, and at one point of her life may even have contemplated suicide, but she held firm to life and to hope. "I like living. I have sometimes been wildly despairing, acutely miserable, racked with sorrow, but through it all I still know quite certainly that just to be alive is a grand thing" (*Autobiography* 11).

The moral world that she created for us, where albeit temporarily, we seek and find consolation and refuge, where we know that no matter what, evil shall not go unpunished and truth and righteousness shall prevail, and thus rekindle our own dwindling courage and faith in humanity, will forever offer solace to generations of readers in the future as it has done in the past. In reading her books we ourselves get infected, to a greater or lesser degree, by her buoyant zest for life and that is probably why, Agatha Christie, continues to be 'the most widely published author of all times and in any language' (Harper Collins). Her creed, her religion are mirrored in her thoughts as penned down in her autobiography :

Always when I woke up, I had the feeling which I am sure must be natural to all of us, a joy in being alive. I don't say you feel it consciously - you don't - but there you *are*, you are alive, and you open your eyes, and here is another day; another step, as it were, on your journey to an unknown place. That very exciting journey which is your life. Not that it is necessarily going to be as exciting *as* a life, but it will be exciting to you because it is *your* life. That is one of the great secrets of existence, enjoying the gift of life that has been given to you (133).

She was one of the few people who could honestly be thankful for who they are and what they have. As early as 1965, much before she was awarded the damedom and her later day successes which were still to follow, she confessed, "I am satisfied. I have done what I wanted to do" (*Autobiography* 7).

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