

**Intertextuality in Tragedy and Crime Fiction in Shakespeare's  
*Othello*, Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, Christie's *Curtain* and  
*Sleeping Murder***

**Assistant Professor Dr. Tara Dabbagh**

[tara.dabbagh@su.edu.krd](mailto:tara.dabbagh@su.edu.krd)

**Salahaddin University, College of  
Languages, Department of English**

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**Abstract**

Christie maneuvers the storylines of Shakespeare's *Othello* (c. 1604) and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613/14) into crime fiction in, respectively, *Curtain* (1975) and *Sleeping Murder* (1976), establishing the actions of certain characters as patterns of behavior. Yet, despite the similarities in the four texts, and in accordance with the requirements of her genre, she does not allow the resulting structuralist intertextuality diminish the suspense in her stories. Unlike the tragedies which aim at emotional involvement, her two books encourage a mental endeavor to solve the puzzle of the crimes.

**1. Introduction**

The domesticity of the tragedies of *Othello* (c.1604) and *The Duchess of Malfi* (1613/14) is a main point of suitability for the crimes of Christie's *Curtain* (1975) and *Sleeping Murder* (1976), for although the major characters in the plays are consequential public figures, their tragedies are private and familial. It is true that the Duchess is head ruler and that Othello is a general in Venice and Governor of Cyprus, yet the plays offer no actions of political or public concerns. What we see is their personal tragedies which are not shown to have any discernable impact on their people. By linking the story lines of her two books to these tragedies, Christie takes advantage of this domesticity to put forth an intertextuality showing that what is seen in the plays constitutes patterns of behavior inevitably leading to death, thus indicating that evil and crime often lurk in the closest quarters, given certain circumstances.

**2. The Underlying Patterns of Behavior in the Texts**

What Christie takes from the two source tragedies, the hypotexts, and molds into her two detective stories, the hypertexts, is basically the underlying patterns of behavior, shared between *Othello* and *Curtain* on one hand, and *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Sleeping Murder* on the other. All the other similarities in each pair of texts, follow as a natural consequence of these patterns of behavior.

### 2.1. *Othello and Curtain*

In *Othello*, Iago is a malcontent who is acutely perceptive of the characters around him, which enables him to trigger whichever emotion he wants in them. Thus, subtly and gradually, he turns Othello against his beloved wife Desdemona, and awakens his uncertainties resulting from the differences between him and her:

Haply for I am black,  
And have not those soft parts of conversation  
That chamberers have, or for I am declined  
Into the vale of years. (III. iii. 263-6)

He understands Othello well enough to know that once his jealousy is roused, he would be quick to take action, as for Othello 'To be once in doubt/Is to be resolved' (III. iii. 180-1), after which there would be 'no more but this,/Away at once with love or jealousy' (III. iii. 192-3). Moreover, he knows that Othello 'is of a free and open nature,/That thinks men honest that but seem to be so' (I. iii. 393-4), which is why he is certain that Othello would take his word for granted, projecting his own honesty on those around him. Likewise, when Cassio, whom Iago accuses of being in an affair with Desdemona, loses his lieutenancy after a drunken brawl -also schemed and carried out by Iago (II. iii. 25-233)- he advises him to ask Desdemona to speak on his behalf to her husband. He is certain that Desdemona would try to persuade Othello to restore Cassio to his post out of the goodness of her heart:

for 'tis most easy  
The inclining Desdemona to subdue  
In any honest suit. She is framed as fruitful  
As the free elements. (II. iii. 316-19)

This interference on her part, as Iago correctly predicts and bargains on, increases Othello's doubts about her marital loyalty to him. Never wasting an opportunity that affords itself for manipulation, Iago thus 'make[s] the net/That [...] enmesh[es] them all' (II. iii. 337-8), and steers Othello to kill the innocent Desdemona even though 'His soul is so enfeathered to her love' (II. iii. 321), that he regards her as 'The fountain from the which [his] current runs/Or else dries up' (IV. ii. 59-60). Othello is so changed under the influence of Iago that he refers to himself as 'he that was Othello' (V. ii. 282), and others think of him as 'Othello, that [was] once so good', who has now 'Fallen in the practice of a cursed slave' wondering 'What shall be said to [him]' (V. ii. 290-2).

Analogously, all the characters in *Curtain*, excluding Poirot, Christie's famous detective, believe the malefactor to be 'an inoffensive' (17)

‘kind’ (69) ‘unselfish- and very considerate’ (70) ‘nice fellow’ (10), which is his way of ingratiating himself with his prospective victims, as Iago does with Othello, Desdemona, Cassio, and Roderigo all of whom trust him and come to him for advice. Still like Iago, the villain in *Curtain* is ‘the sort of person who sees a lot’ and ‘notices a good deal’ (69) as ‘quiet people often do’ (70), laying hands on difficult and complex familial situations ‘to work on’ (73). His method of crime, as explained by Poirot who dubs him ‘X’, is to bring about a case of catalysis - a reaction between two substances that takes place only in the presence of a third substance, that third substance apparently taking no part in the reaction and remaining unchanged. [...Which] means that where X was present, crimes took place- but X did not actively take part in these crimes. (169)

Thus ‘X’ drives ‘victim after victim’ to commit murder (172) by whetting and provoking their resentments, jealousies, greed, or any unhappy negative emotion that, if not for his influence, would go by harmlessly. As Iago ‘ensnare[s]’ Othello’s ‘soul and body’ (V. ii. 301), ‘X’ temporarily induces a killer mentality in his targets which is so out of their character that it is inconceivable by all who know them well (72, 78-9, 81, 112, 149). His influence undermines the ‘real and true affection [that] exist[s]’ ‘underneath the quarrels, the misunderstandings, the apparent hostility of everyday life’ (84). His victims, like Iago’s victims, do not suspect his intentions in the crimes which he slyly encourages as they do not benefit him in any material way, and only feed his ‘two lusts, the lust of a sadist and the lust for power’ by practicing his ‘morbid taste for violence at second hand’ (172).

## **2.2. *The Duchess of Malfi And Sleeping Murder***

In defiance of social standards and of her two brothers the Cardinal and Duke Ferdinand in *The Duchess of Malfi*, the Duchess secretly marries her steward Antonio after the death of her first husband. Before the marriage takes place, the Cardinal warns his sister against matrimony saying that she should ‘let not youth: high promotion, eloquence’ in a man ‘sway her high blood’ into remarriage after her widowhood (I. ii. 215-16). Ferdinand’s warning is more openly chilling as he accuses all women who ‘wed twice’ of being lascivious (I. ii. 218), and threatens violence should she remarry: ‘This was my father’s poniard: do you see,/ I’ll’d be loath to see’t look rusty’ (I. ii. 250-1). He also warns her against throwing ‘chargeable revels’ in which ‘A visor and a mask are whispering-rooms/That were nev’r built for goodness’ (I. ii. 252-4). Given the description of the two brothers by other characters, and given their own speeches and undertakings in the play, the audience comes to realize that their intention in standing against their sister’s marriage is not merely

protection of their royal family name, but also advancement of their own financial gain, as ‘Had she continu’d widow’ they would ‘have gain’d/An infinite mass of treasure by her death’ (IV. ii. 278-9). The Duchess, however, has already decided that she ‘through frights and threat’nings, will assay/This dangerous venture’ of marriage (I. ii. 266-7), thus exposing herself to her brothers indignation and wrathful vengeance which ends in her death.

Yet another reason is perceived in the character of Ferdinand for his relentless pursuit of the Duchess’s complete destruction post her marriage. The play subtly indicates a hidden incestuous inclination on his part towards his sister, adding to the prevalent macabre and malevolent sense of doom. To keep a watchful eye on their sister, The Cardinal suggests appointing Bosola as a spy in the Duchess’s household, but he himself ‘would not be seen in’t’(I. ii. 146). He is shown to have other general preoccupations due to his notable public status (III. iii. 1-3, III. iv. Dumb Show), unlike Ferdinand who is more directly and emotionally involved with the Duchess. Bosola reports to him and seeks him for payment, and receives his orders of torturing the Duchess and finally killing her directly from him. His strong emotional involvement comes to light when the secret marriage is exposed. The Cardinal is, as he was in his warning to his sister against marriage, focused on the family name:

Shall our blood?  
The royal blood of Aragon and Castile,  
Be thus attainted? (II. v. 22-3)

Ferdinand, on the other hand, is fixated on the obscene image of his sister ‘in the shameful act of sin’ (II. v. 41). He calls the Duchess a ‘whore’ (II. v. 49) and a ‘notorious strumpet’ (II. v. 4) who

hath had most cunning bawds to serve her turn,  
And more secure conveyances for lust,  
Than towns of garrison, for service. (II. v. 9-11)

He wishes to ‘dip the sheets’ which the Duchess and her husband

lie in, in pitch or sulphur,  
Wrap them in’t, and then light them like a match:  
Or else boil their bastard to a cullis,  
And giv’t his lecherous father. (II. v. 71-4)

Feeling the enormity of his anger, he shouts ‘Rhubarb, oh for rhubarb/  
To purge this choler’ (II. v. 12-13), as the Duchess’s ‘marriage[.]

drew a stream of gall quite through [Ferdinand's] heart' (IV. ii. 281). By comparison, the Cardinal's social indignation is calmer, indicating a much lesser emotional involvement. He asks Ferdinand why he makes himself 'so wild a tempest?' (II. v. 17), trying to show him that he is 'fly[ing] beyond [his] reason' (II. v. 47):

How idly shows this rage! which carries you,  
As men convey'd by witches, through the air  
On violent whirlwinds. (II. v. 50-3)

He reminds Ferdinand that he too is 'angry', but  
Without this rupture; there is not in nature  
A thing, that makes man so deform'd, so beastly  
As doth intemperate anger. (II. v. 56-9)

Here, he is inadvertently accentuating the carnal side in Ferdinand's character.

Like the Duchess, Helen in *Sleeping Murder* also seeks happiness in marriage and attempts to break away from familial control and hold. To her too familial protection is proffered to conceal incestuous desire, which shows that Christie anchors her criminal on Webster's Ferdinand and not on the Cardinal in whose character no incestuous inclination could be detected. Like the Duchess, who is discouraged by Ferdinand against 'chargeable revels' (I. ii. 252), Helen's desire for normal social entertainments is frowned upon by her guardian who, in his 'possessive and unwholesome' (186) love for her, goes to extremes to prevent them. Miss Marple, who investigates Helen's murder, explains that 'First he was strict and old fashioned about allowing her liberty. Then, when she wanted to give tennis parties –a most normal and harmless desire– he pretended to agree and then one night secretly cut the tennis net to ribbons –a very significant and sadistic action'. And to prevent her from socializing as long as possible, 'he took advantage of [her] grazed foot which he treated, to infect it so that it wouldn't heal' (186). Significantly, although Helen only later comes to realize the true nature of this passion, she seems to 'have had some instinct that [it] would be wiser' to get married first and then to present her guardian 'with the marriage as a *fait accompli*' (187). Learning of Helen's intention to leave to another city with her husband and step daughter to break free from his sick attachment, this supposed protector's obsession finally climaxes in her murder. Moreover, as in Webster's play, the criminal's unnatural possessive passion towards Helen marks her husband too as a target of hate and hostility, as a result of which he subjects him to a prolonged psychological torment ending in suicide.



### 3. A Comparison of the Four Texts

Christie contrives the plots of her two detective stories *Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder* to incorporate the setup of the two source tragedies *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, reshaping them into puzzling crimes and the process of their deciphering. As elsewhere in her detective writing where plot construction is her main strength,<sup>1</sup> the plots of these two books stand out among the other deliberately subordinated constituents. *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi* also have powerful plotlines for, although character comes first in tragedy, it is still the plot that showcases the tragic consequences of choices made in it, hence Aristotle's insistence on the necessity of good tragic plots. As regards character in Christie, and although she writes in an age of widely diffused psychoanalysis, she merely resorts to psychoanalytic tropes in adequate yet anonymous characterization. Only fleetingly does she mention in *Curtain* that the culprit never had any self-assertion and was negatively influenced by a domineering mother (69, 171), and only at the opening chapters of *Sleeping Murder* does she amplify the psychological aspect of the repressed violent childhood memories of Gwenda, the victim's stepdaughter, which initiate the following events; thereon, the focus shifts back to the puzzle of the crime and the process of its solution. In this line of shallow characterization, Barnard considers her characters 'stereotyped' and 'tailored to suit' the 'incidents', and though 'sufficiently involving while we read' the stories, these characters 'have no existence outside the puzzle which has called them into existence' (88, 91), contrary to tragedy whose characters last as subjects of continuous inquiry and interest.

Christie follows a similar tactic in her settings which, like her characters, are adequate but lacking in vividness. *Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder* fall into her typical confined country house setting<sup>2</sup> which creates a claustrophobic feel of impending doom, arousing a sense of urgency integral to crime fiction. However, in these two stories, she attaches more significance to the settings. She furthers the feel of impending murder in *Curtain*, which features Poirot's last case, by setting it in the very same country house of Poirot's first murder case in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920). The house is frequently described as unlucky, unhappy, and even evil (71, 100, 114, 121, 135, 150, 158), creating a sense of urgency further enhanced by the fact that the manipulative killer, who has caused many deaths in his lifetime, is now one of the residents of this country guest house. Poirot, who is ill and dying, and who is the only person who knows the identity of the killer, literally has to race time to prevent further murders from being committed. In *Sleeping Murder*,

Christie allows the country house, newly purchased by Gwenda, the important role of igniting her dormant memories of a crime long consigned to oblivion. As the story develops it transpires that she had witnessed that crime in that very same house, where she had lived for a short period of her childhood.

The settings of the relevant Shakespeare and Webster tragedies also add to the prominent sense of doom and urgency. In *Othello*, there is a strong sense of temporal urgency as Shakespeare tightens the dramatic effect by condensing the plot into a mere few days. He does not allow Othello and Desdemona, as summed up by Mehl, more than 'a very brief moment of blissful ecstasy, a single, repeatedly interrupted wedding-night and a catastrophe whose irresistible swiftness leaves no time for rational reflection', all of which is further enhanced by the 'omnipresen[ce]' of the evil Iago (1999: 57, 58). On the other hand, as the time span of *The Duchess of Malfi* is not concentrated as it is in *Othello*, the sense of urgency is chiefly derived from the claustrophobic feel of the setting. Whigham posits that the 'tense fraternal defensiveness' of the Duchess's social status by her two brothers, which is one of the reasons why the 'figuration of status narcissism as incest has probably become inevitable' after this and previous plays,<sup>3</sup> drives the Duchess, the female head of state, to resort to secrecy in her marriage to Antonio, her Steward. Her attempt at liberation from social restrictions is thwarted by the powerful figures of her brothers, and, instead of the aspired liberation, her marriage 'grows more and more claustrophobic', an 'effective quarantine', furthered by the 'oppressive' necessity of secrecy, 'typical of adultery rather than marriage' (1996: 188, 209). In addition, as affirmed by Luckyj, the Duchess is 'under constant surveillance, never once alone on the stage' (2011: 71), most notably by Bosola who is appointed by her brothers as a spy in her own household (I. ii. 136-139, 145-6, 172-7). An outstanding example of this is his scrutiny of her hungrily eating the apricots which he gives her, increasing his suspicions of her being pregnant (II. i. 160, II. ii.1-3), after which she suddenly falls in labor, allowing for 'no time for her remove' (II. i. 165-6). Antonio has to resort to lying that the Duchess has 'lost much plate' and Jewels, to the value of four thousand ducats' (II. ii. 45-6), and that

'Tis the Duchess' pleasure  
Each officer be lock'd into his chamber  
Till the sun-rising, (II. ii. 48-50)

thus allowing time for her to deliver her child secretly. However, Bosola hears shrieks of pain coming from her rooms, which furthers his doubts that

there's some stratagem  
 In the confining all [the] courtiers  
 To their several wards. (II. iii. 3-5)

When Antonio sees him walking about on that night, he prophesies that 'this mole' will be his final undoing (II. ii. 13, 29), in typical tragic foreshadowing.

The brothers' stance, more particularly Ferdinand's, against their sister's marriage, is adapted by Christie to the crime outline of *Sleeping Murder*. The similarities of behavior become clear as Miss Marple unravels the mystery. She points out that the negative assumptions of the victim's wild and deviant character (54, 109, 112, 113, 130, 131, 186) had in fact been skillfully and subtly spread by the criminal to arouse sympathy for him as her guardian, and understanding of his scrutiny of her behavior. Gradually, his close watch of Helen, his victim, had grown more depraved, resulting in a sense of inexplicable unease on Helen's part who 'was too young and guileless' to grasp the reality of the situation, and to escape which she had decided to leave Dillmouth where she grew up, and go as far away as India to get married. When she had come home as a married woman, the criminal's behavior had 'definitely passed the borderline between sanity and madness by that time. And Helen, [...], began to realize it'. Consequently, she had secretly 'persuaded her husband to buy a house in Norfolk' (100, 188) for them to move into, in an attempt to escape that evil and to live a normal life with her husband and her stepdaughter Gwenda, a prospect which the perpetrator, in his jealousy of her possible happiness with any man, could not tolerate, and to prevent which he had killed her (186-8). Helen's attempt to escape the sense of inexplicable unease by travelling to India and her later attempt to leave Dillmouth with her husband and stepdaughter to be freely happy, boost the association of setting with restrictions also found in *The Duchess of Malfi*. There too the Duchess seeks freedom by secretly planning her family's escape from Malfi to Ancona (III. ii. 174-77, 300-5) once her marriage is found out. The link to Ferdinand is made clearer as Gwenda remembers the murder of Helen on hearing Ferdinand's 'Cover her face. Mine eyes dazzle: she di'd young' (IV. ii. 259), when attending a performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* (23). As these words, spoken by Ferdinand immediately after the killing of the Duchess, were repeated by Helen's murderer as he stood over her dead body, they revive Gwenda's vague childhood memory of this crime which she witnessed, unwittingly and unbeknown to the killer whose face she, then only a child of three (42) looking through the banisters, could not see (26, 30). Ferdinand's words finally bring



together Gwenda's fragments of memory triggered by the setting of the house, and the actual murder committed there.

The confining feel of the texts pours, in turn, into the element of intrigue, which is also a plot device and a main factor in crime. Indeed, intrigue is more strongly present in the two plays than is usual in tragedy. Dolan wonders at the 'sustained secrets' in *The Duchess of Malfi* which are kept even from 'a resident spy' (2011: 119), namely, Bosola. Desdemona's handkerchief, which gains the potential of 'solidify[ing] Desdemona's honor, or dishonor, for Othello' (Leggat 2005: 131), moving from one hand to another, is a concrete device of the many lines of intrigue in *Othello*. It is accidentally dropped by Desdemona, picked up by Emilia who gives it to her husband Iago who had 'a hundred times/ Wooed [her] to steal it' (III. iii. 292-3) with 'a solemn earnestness' that she later realizes was 'More than, indeed, belonged to such a trifle' (V. ii. 226-7). Iago then manages to get it into Cassio's hands which substantiates Othello's suspicions about the latter's having an affair with his wife. Finally, the handkerchief is the only material proof of Iago's guilt. As is usual, the intrigue springs from the clouded vision prevalent in the two plays: all the characters in *Othello*, including Othello and Desdemona themselves, are blind to the reality of Iago, the villain of the piece, and repeatedly refer to him as 'honest' or 'good' Iago, oblivious of the fact that he manipulates them as he wants. Likewise, the culprit in *Curtain* is trusted by all except the sleuth. The Duchess's hazy vision is seen in her disregard of 'all discord' outside the 'circumference' of her and Antonio's love (I. ii. 384), downplaying the danger that her two brothers pose should she marry secretly. Antonio, her husband, acts similarly after their marriage is found out, and despite his friend Delio (V. i. 3-13) and the echo's warning against it (V. iv. 32, 36-9), he pursues his 'hope of reconciliation/ To the Aragonian brethren', and 'venture[s] all [his] fortune,/ [...] To the Cardinal's worst of malice' (V. i. 2, 61-3), which results in his death. In like manner, Helen in *Sleeping Murder* underestimates the lengths to which the evil in her family might go, and erroneously regards her marriage as her means of escape from that evil (187). But, because suspense is not an aim in tragedy, the intrigue in the two plays is shared with the audience as it occurs, thus intentionally allowing for a deep perception and enjoyment of the intricacies of character. On the other hand, and typically of crime fiction, the intrigue is used as a means of suspense in the Christie books. In both genres, however, a sense of justice is finally achieved when punishment is exacted where it is deserved.

The theme of madness provides another link between the four works. Inflamed by Iago, Othello kills his wife in a fit of mad jealousy. Iago himself raises endless unanswered questions as to his motives in

turning Othello against his wife and encouraging him to kill her, in the wake of which other murders are committed. Honigmann notices that *Othello* is the ‘only [tragedy] in which the same questions [of Iago’s motives] still have their urgency in the closing moment’ as they did throughout the whole play. In fact, Honigmann argues, *Othello* is the only tragedy in which ‘a leading figure (and also Shakespeare) ostentatiously announces that his motives will not be divulged’, when an explanation is demanded of him (2002: 77, 78): ‘Demand me nothing. What you know, you know./ From this time forth I never will speak word’ (V. ii. 302-3). Of the plethora of critical attempts to arrive at Iago’s motives, ranging from his being a descendant of the traditional theatrical Tempter and Vice, to the theological perception of him as a Satanic figure, Christie focuses on his hunger for power and control. When explaining the crimes in *Curtain*, Poirot shows that the criminal, who corresponds to the character of Iago, tried to make up for his general insignificance by putting his ability of tempting people to commit crimes to use (171), without actually committing any himself. This fed ‘his sense of power’ (172), and made him ‘the perfect murderer’ who ‘*could never be convicted of crime*’ (169), a trait which, if not for Desdemona’s handkerchief and the intervention of Emilia at the end, is also shared by Iago who, Christie clearly states, is ‘the original’ of the criminal in *Curtain* (169). Concurringly, Leggatt points out that Iago’s ultimate refusal to explain his doings is his way ‘of keeping power [...] by keeping to himself the meaning of his act, denying it to anyone else’ (2005: 141). Similarly, when confronted by Poirot, Christie’s murderer simply sits ‘back in his chair and smirk[s]’, offering no explanation or attempt at denial, relishing his false conviction of Poirot’s inability of putting an end to his crimes (183). Seen thus, his and Iago’s final silence is their manifestation of their morbid sense of power which has, in effect, turned them into serial killers whose sole reward is a sense of gruesome satisfaction.

Being a revenge tragedy, madness is clearly manifested in *The Duchess of Malfi*. At the outset of the play, when Cariola, the Duchess’s woman, learns of the marriage between her mistress and Antonio, she wonders at the Duchess’s defiance of the standard norms of the time in her covert marriage to her own Steward. The Duchess’s marriage thus breaks the established social code of familial masculine authority and surveillance of female relatives, in this case of the Duchess’s two brothers. To Cariola this behavior nears madness:

Whether the spirit of greatness, or of woman  
 Reign most in her, I know not, but it shows  
 A fearful madness: I owe her much of pity. (I. ii. 417-19)

Ferdinand takes it for a fact that his sister ‘needs be mad’ (IV. i. 124) to have so willfully got married, independent of her brothers’ approval. Thereupon, he is ‘resolved/ To remove forth the common hospital/ All the mad folk, and place them near her lodging’ (IV. i. 124-6), directly exposing her to madness. The Duchess, however, maintains her sanity to the last and, ironically, it is Ferdinand who grows lycanthropic as a result of his ‘melancholy humour’ (V. ii. 9) post her death, and, in one instance, imagines himself to be engaged in a struggle with his own shadow, which he tries to ‘throttle’ by throwing himself on it (V. ii. 38). In a further irony, the doctor treating him has to ‘do mad tricks with him,/ For that’s the only way’ to handle his insanity (V. ii. 58-9), just as Ferdinand himself thought of exposing his sister to ‘mad folk’ (IV. i. 126) as the only way of handling her. Furthermore, lycanthropy, Brennan maintains, ‘was a recognized symptom of love-melancholy’, which confirms Ferdinand’s unwholesome incestuous passion for his sister (1977: xiv). Yet another instance of mental disorder, brought on by the guilt of killing the Duchess, is seen in her other brother, the Cardinal, ‘a melancholy churchman’ from the start (I. ii. 80-1), imagining even in

the fishponds, in [his] garden,  
[.] a thing arm’d with a rake  
That seems to strike at [him]. (V. v. 5-7)

Madness is introduced early on in *Sleeping Murder* when Gwenda doubts her sanity as she experiences an ‘irrational terror’ at certain spots in her newly purchased home, which makes her wonder if the house is haunted (11). Her fear for her sanity increases as attending a performance of *The Duchess of Malfi* (23) evokes in her mind the crime scene of Helen, of whom she then has no remembrance (26-27). On checking facts however, Gwenda finds out that she had actually lived as a child for a short period of time in the very same house which she has newly moved into, and that Helen was her stepmother. Gradually it becomes clear that what Gwenda envisions is not agitated imagination but actual past facts. Halliday, Gwenda’s father and Helen’s husband, had also believed himself to be mad as he imagined that he had killed his wife and had somehow lost all remembrance of it. Following Helen’s inexplicable disappearance, as her body is not discovered until eighteen years later when Gwenda’s memory of her murder is roused, he was persuaded by the real murderer to confine himself to a sanatorium where he finally committed suicide still believing himself to be guilty of her murder (189). When solving the crime Miss Marple clarifies that Halliday’s hallucinations were

induced by drugs ‘administered’ to him by the criminal (187). Helen, in her own turn, had been, except for very few people who knew her well, generally considered ‘man mad’ (83) and ‘a little sex-crazy’ (186). As finally explained by Miss Marple, such perceptions of her character had been encouraged by the criminal to induce public condemnation against her, as such a portrayal of her character facilitated his evoking a general consensus that her sudden disappearance must have been because of an extra marital association with an unknown man, to sidetrack suspicions of the possibility of foul play. Nemesis takes charge, however, and his own madness comes to light when he is caught up in the entanglements of his own wrongdoings (191), just as Ferdinand’s madness becomes evident after his sister’s murder.

Both Helen and the Duchess’s attempts to escape oppressive authority and hold come to a tragic end. However, these two oppressed women do not allow their murders to go unpunished, which leads to the supernatural in the two texts. Indeed, Helen comes very close to being a ghost seeking revenge as she haunts the memories of her step daughter Gwenda who has no conscious remembrance of the former’s murder, and who points out herself that the stirring up of the mystery is ‘[Helen’s] doing’ (155). At the outset of her search for a house to buy, Gwenda is uncannily drawn to the house of her childhood where Helen was murdered, and only when the murderer is exposed and Helen’s innocence of character established, does Gwenda feel that ‘poor lovely Helen, who died young [...] isn’t there anymore- in the house- [...] There’s just the house [now]’ (192). This is a further reminder of the Duchess whose voice survives her as an echo (V. iii), and whose innocence haunts her killers until her revenge is complete, proving that ‘*Integrity of life is fame’s best friend,/ Which nobly, beyond death, shall crown the end*’ (V.v. 119-20).

The sense of urgency, confinement, and intrigue, alongside the thematic links of the victimization of the innocent, madness, and the super natural, catalyze the horror that is naturally associated with crime and is expected in the genres of tragedy and crime fiction. The whole action of *Othello* is accelerated towards the expected murder of Desdemona, in turn followed by other deaths, resulting in a stage littered with dead bodies. There is a similar display of corpses at the end of *The Duchess of Malfi* which comes as a natural end to the other harrowing scenes of the cruel torture of the Duchess prior to her death. But, whereas the action in the tragedies escalates towards the murders which, to achieve emotional effect and involvement, are committed on stage in plain view of the audience, detective story, by definition, necessitates that the plot should build up from crimes already committed towards unmasking the murderer, so that the detection

process could take place. Hence, the violence associated with crime is held in check in the two books by Christie whose mode of crime presentation is not meant to terrify the reader or to arouse his emotional involvement; rather, he is meant to concentrate on deciphering the clues given to him. In her typical cool approach, which leads Bloom to describe her writing as a 'craft' (2002: 1), she provides a compelling oversupply of clues in the forthright references to *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi* in *Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder*, drawing the reader to a teasing battle of wits with the detectives of the murder cases. Engrossed in this competition, the crimes only arouse the reader's rational curiosity and powers to solve the puzzle. Emotional detachment thus achieved, the plots guide the reader to suspect almost all the characters in turn, for no one is above suspicion in Christie, until finally the criminals are exposed by what Teraoka terms 'the superior powers of deductive reasoning' operated by the sleuths (2009: 115). In doing so, Christie meets the requirements of her genre which, of necessity, excludes complex characterization and thematic nuances, and invites the reader to the pleasurable role of a quasi detective.

#### 4. The Intertextuality in the Four Texts

*Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder* fall into the category of crime fiction described by Horsley as 'detective-centered narrative structure[s]' (2009: 4), as Hercule Poirot and Jane Marple undertake the detective role of unraveling the mystery of the crimes committed in them. Exhibiting a structuralist stance, Christie not only imposes the detective story form on the storylines which she takes from *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi*, she moreover molds them into her own near-standard construction, whereby she scatters pieces of the mysteries of her airtight plots. The crimes are present as 'puzzles' that need solutions', both ingredients which Fitzgibbon finds essential for a work to be labeled 'detective story' (1980: 1). Indeed, the two books thus showcase Cobley's argument that the 'typical "structuralist" conception' regards 'genre [as] an omnipotent vessel: no matter what is poured into the vessel' (2000: 123). In her adaptation of the patterns of behavior of *Othello* and *The Duchess of Malfi* to her two detective stories Christie focuses on 'the conditions that make meaning possible, rather than on meaning itself', which is, as pointed out by Bertens, a typical structuralist approach (2007: 59). This is because 'structuralism originated in opposition to phenomenology: instead of describing experience, the goal [is] to identify the underlying structures that make it possible' (Culler 2000: 123-4). Thus the underlying behavioral structures of the two tragedies form what Lodge and Wood label the 'explanatory models' (2000:



137) on which Christie bargains as definitive clues to solving the crimes in her two books, because this is where the intertextuality takes place. The resulting intertextuality, in turn, is in line with Lukacs's argument that it is the 'content' and the 'intention' of a writer that are 'formative principle[s]' in determining his 'form' (1996: 143). The intertextual patterns of behavior of the major characters, i.e., the content, of *Othello* and *Curtain* on one hand, and of *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Sleeping Murder* on the other hand, are positively similar. However, the intention of each genre is different, hence the different forms of presentation.

Plett's discussion in 'Text vs. Intertext' applies to both the tragedies and the crime stories. He states that a 'text may be regarded as an autonomous sign structure, delimited and coherent', and that 'its boundaries are indicated by its beginning, middle and end, its coherence by the deliberately interrelated conjunction of its constituents'. Plett also argues that 'all intertexts are texts' as 'the latter half of the term suggests' (1991: 5). Hence, the connecting intertextual gist of the content also constitutes an entity on its own. Seen thus, there are three texts in each case of intertextuality at hand: each of the two tragedies is a text just as is each of Christie's books, so is the connected part between each tragedy and its corresponding crime story, namely, the patterns of behavior. Furthermore, each of these texts, again referring to Plett's argument, 'has a twofold coherence: an *intratextual* one which guarantees the immanent integrity of the text, and an *intertextual* one which creates structural relations between itself and other texts. This twofold coherence makes for the richness and complexity of the intertext' (1991: 5). Along similar lines, Pfister argues that in the 'structuralist version of intertextuality the author retains authority over his text, the unity and autonomy of the text remain intact, and the reader does not get lost in a labyrinthine network of possible references but realizes the author's intentions by decoding the signals and markers inscribed into the text' (1991: 210). It is such facts that lead Allen to conclude that 'structuralist critics employ the [...] term [intertextuality] to locate [...] literary meaning' (2001: 4) with the author in full control.<sup>4</sup>

Christie is such an author as she mediates the puzzles of her crimes through what she deems the behavioral structures that she finds in the hypotexts, all the while maintaining the autonomy of her hypertexts. Indeed, a reader who is not familiar with the hypotexts would fully understand and appreciate her crimes. However, she introduces and deliberately boosts the links to the tragedies, sometimes through direct references or verbatim quotes at significant moments of the crime stories. She chooses to thus challenge herself by rendering it extra difficult to withhold the identity of her murderers till the very end, and

to challenge her reader in daring him to solve the mystery of the crimes despite the obvious intertextuality. The intertextuality is deliberate, but by no means necessary. It is a bonus for the reader who *is* familiar with the tragedies and who sees the similarities even more clearly once the crimes are solved. Such a reader would realize, as Christie would want him to, that characters as those introduced in the hypotexts and the hypertexts are bound by their psychological make-up to act as they do, given pertinent circumstances. In other words, this reader gets to recognize the underlying structuralist pattern of behavior, besides feeling the thrill of having the crimes finally solved.

The reader thus privileged with prior knowledge of the tragedies, along with an experienced Christie reader who would know that usually her criminals turn out to be the most obvious - in this case most obvious because they correspond to their prototypes in the tragedies- is, nevertheless, misguided by Christie as to the identity of the criminals. Being a crime story writer, she takes the crime side of the tragedies and reintroduces it in her genre, achieving an effect on her reader totally different from that of the tragedies on their audience. She directs her reader back to the tragedies, not in effect, but in admiring surprise. Such a reader would then realize that he has been deliberately confused by the crime details such as timing, possible motives, diversity of character perception, and by the numerous suspects, offering or withholding information at will. Though providing clues, the narration also often deliberately distracts the reader from those very clues at critical moments. However, based on the intentional intertextual structuralist behavioral patterns of the characters involved in *Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder*, it becomes clear that the crimes are in fact already solved from the very beginning. In *Curtain*, once the truth is exposed by Poirot, the reader comes to see the similarity of the tactics of the criminal to those of Iago, 'for [in Othello], magnificently delineated, we have the original of X' (169). Furthermore, even as the puzzle is still unsolved, there are direct references to *Othello*, as when some lines by Iago are mentioned as a clue to a crossword puzzle just before a crime is committed (123-5), when Hastings, the narrator, wonders how the play could be a clue (164), and when Poirot provides a copy of it as a sure way of 'lead[ing ..] to the discovery of the truth' (153, 161). Miss Marple in *Sleeping Murder* draws attention to the significance of Ferdinand's words which awaken Gwenda's memory of the murder of Helen: 'I was stupid – very stupid. We were all stupid. We should have seen at once. Those lines from *The Duchess of Malfi* were really the clue to the whole thing' (189). Christie here shows the reader how he has been teased by the extra clue of the intertextuality which, in both her books

challenges her reader to make the right conclusions. This is another explicit instance of Christie's 'authorial presence' and 'identity', terms which Carter uses in his discussion of the 'role' and the 'presence' of an author in a text (2006: 144). She is very much the controlling authority who intentionally directs or misdirects the reader.

Through this heteroglossia Christie carries out a cultural discourse often associated with intertextuality. Locating the answer to her crimes in the tragedies, she establishes the fact that the truth, though glaringly obvious, is not recognized by her characters in, or her readers of, *Curtain*, just as it is not recognized by Othello who fails to distinguish the innocent from the guilty. She also posits, in the intertextuality between *The Duchess of Malfi* and *Sleeping Murder*, that evil may come from the closest people from whom protection and support are expected instead of greed and murder. This cultural discourse achieved through the intertextuality thus goes beyond the limits of the four texts themselves, and becomes a semiotic inquiry, pervasively relevant.

### Conclusion

Christie's structuralist approach in relating the characters of *Curtain* and *Sleeping Murder* to, respectively, Shakespeare's *Othello* and Webster's *The Duchess of Malfi*, shows that the psychology of such characters would inevitably lead to the tragedy of murder, granted specific circumstances. This structuralist stance thus conveys the premise that characters who might appear different, actually carry out a number of roles that occur as a matter of course in fixed relations to each other. These roles and fixed relations are established by the resulting intertextuality as patterns of behavior universally relevant, regardless of the difference in time or of the genre that depicts them. Christie's strong authorial presence is felt in her hypertexts as she takes advantage of the domesticity, the intriguing compelling plots, the sense of urgency and confinement, the prevalent misconceptions, and the horror of the committed crimes in the hypotexts and definitively channels them to her own purposes, as dictated by her genre of the detective story. Whereas tragedy aims at emotional involvement and ponders the very core of humanity, always unfathomable, and hence, of necessity, unresolved, the main aim in the detective story is to create suspense and expose the criminal, for there are no layers of presentation in it; its meaning and interpretation are the same. Christie leaves no loose ends or unanswered questions as she narrows down the scope of the two tragedies when recontextualizing them in her books, offering a mental challenge to the reader to solve the puzzle of the crimes despite the extra clue she

provides in the obvious intertextuality. Her focus, as always in her detective writing, is the puzzle and the enjoyable rational process of its unraveling.

### Notes

1. Christie's plots evolve around solving the puzzles of the crimes committed. This explains for Fitzgibbon her discarding of all 'literary flourishes' or 'any neat turning of a phrase, any moralizing' (1980: 34). To Hughes 'She was the clever Christie, the one who thought up all manner of intricacies to tempt the attention of the reader' (2002: 19). Symons allocates Christie's 'skill' in 'the construction of plot', where lies her supremacy 'as a creator of detective puzzles' (2002: 77). Knight calls 'the Christie approach the "clue-puzzle"' (2004: xii), and Osborne notes that in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), and by implication in all Christie's detective work, 'there is a proliferation of clues which are there for the reader to discover' (2002: 109). Likewise, Barnard sees her as a 'teller of popular tales' whose success he attributes to 'the way she structures her books' in a process of 'gradual revelation of vital elements in the murder situation' until finally all the complications 'fall together' and solve the puzzle (2002: 90).

2. Discussing *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), 'the first full-length Miss Marple tale', Rowland establishes its 'rural English village [setting] as a kind of expanded country house', of which Christie's recurrent use positions her as the queen 'of the so-called English country house murder' (2001: 49).

3. Whigham sees the instances in Ferdinand's behavior that 'are widely thought to suggest incestuous desires' towards his sister the Duchess as those of a 'threatened aristocrat, [...] obsessively preoccupied with' the protection of their family's 'social rank' (1996: 191), hence his absolute and violent rejection of the Duchess's marriage to her Steward. In this context Whigham relates *The Duchess of Malfi* to *The Spanish Tragedy*, *Hamlet*, and *King Lear* (1996: 188). A counter argument would be that the Cardinal, the Duchess's other brother, also completely opposes her marriage for social and financial reasons, yet his behavior, contrary to Ferdinand's, does not have any incestuous hints.

4. Allen mentions this while discussing the difference between structuralist and poststructuralist conceptions of intertextuality:

That poststructuralist critics employ the term intertextuality to disrupt notions of meaning, whilst structuralist critics employ the same term to locate and even fix literary meaning, is proof enough of its flexibility as a concept. [Many critics] have also attempted to deploy intertextual theory without necessarily embracing the celebration of

plurality and the “death of the Author” that poststructuralism would associate with that term (2001: 4). The reference here is to Ronald Barthes’s idea of ‘The Death of the Author’, his 1967 essay.

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التناص بين التراخيديا والرواية البوليسية  
في مسرحيتي "عطيل" لشكسبير و"دوقة مالفي" لويبستر، وروايتي "ستارة" و "الجريمة  
النائمة" لكراستي

أ.م.د. تارا طاهر الدباغ  
جامعة صلاح الدين  
كلية اللغات  
قسم اللغة الانكليزية  
الخلاصة

تناور كراستي قصتي مسرحيتي "عطيل" (١٦٠٤) لشكسبير و "دوقة مالفي" (١٤/١٦١٣) لويبستر في روايتيها البوليسيتين "ستارة" (١٩٧٥) و "الجريمة النائمة" (١٩٧٦) على التوالي، مرسخةً بذلك تصرف بعض الشخصيات في هذه الأعمال كأنماط سلوكية. ولكن، وبالرغم من التشابه في هذه النصوص الأربعة، وتوافقاً مع متطلبات صنفها الأدبي، فإن كراستي لاتدع التناص البنيوي الناتج أن يقلل أو يضعف التشويق في روايتها. خلافاً للمسرحيتين الأساسيتين اللتين تهدفان الى إكتناف عاطفي لجمهور المشاهدين، فإن روايتي كراستي تحثان القارئ على محاولاتٍ وسعي ذهني لحل ألغاز الجرائم المرتكبة فيها.