

Debora A. Sarnelli

LETTI E RILETTI

*Investigando i confini: spazi di genere e liminali in 4.50 from Paddington di Agata Christie*

*Investigating the in-betweenness: gendered spaces and liminality in Agatha Christie's 4.50 from Paddington*

#### Abstract

Lo studio prende in esame il romanzo della scrittrice britannica Agatha Christie, *4.50 from Paddington* (titolo in italiano *Istantanea di un delitto*) analizzando gli spazi della narrazione, il treno e la casa padronale di Rutherford Hall. Il primo rappresenta la sfera pubblica nonché spazio maschile, la seconda, invece, spazio privato e associato alla figura femminile. Se il primo simboleggia libertà, dinamismo e progresso, la seconda incarna la sfera domestica, la staticità e un'epoca ormai passata. Rutherford Hall occupa, infatti, quello spazio di confine tra città e campagna, tra progresso e tradizione, tra spazio pubblico e privato. Sarà lo spazio liminale della finestra del treno a collegare le due sfere, quella pubblica e quella domestica.

L'opposizione binaria tra spazio pubblico/maschile e spazio privato/femminile è evidente sin dall'incipit del romanzo. Elspeth, testimone oculare del delitto, è screditata dalle autorità competenti in quanto donna. Per individuare il luogo esatto dove l'assassino ha nascosto il cadavere e per smascherare lo stesso omicida, Miss Marple si farà aiutare da Elspeth e Lucy, dando vita a un trio tutto al femminile. L'aiuto reciproco e il legame che si instaura tra le tre donne si riveleranno fondamentali per la soluzione del caso.

Parole chiave: genere; spazi liminali; non-luogo; solidarietà femminile; Agatha Christie

#### Abstract

The article aims at examining Agatha Christie's mystery *4.50 from Paddington* as a novel where the issue of gender is highly interrelated with that of the train regarded here as a non-place entirely controlled by men. The analysis begins with the emphasis on the

contrast between public and private spheres in order to draw attention to the gendering of these spaces. The dichotomies of male–female, public–private, worldly–domestic, and mobility–immobility are evident within the narration. The novel is constructed on the binary opposition between male and female spaces, with the train as the emblem of mobility and masculinity, whereas the house of Rutherford Hall stands as the epitome of stasis and domesticity. The first is a symbol of rushing modernity, while the latter epitomises the epoch of the great country houses, which is inevitably ending. Rutherford Hall, stuck in an in-between space amid the railway and the town, is about to be absorbed by the impending modernity. The house occupies the liminal space that is neither town nor countryside, marking a boundary between two worlds: the past and the future, the tradition and the progress, between stillness and motion, the domestic and the public.

It is the liminal windowpane through which Mrs McGillicuddy witnesses the murder that bonds the masculine-oriented train space to the domestic space of the house. When Miss Marple geographically pinpoints the place where the body was concealed, the real identities of both the victim and the murderer are eventually disclosed. The study highlights the fundamental role women solidarity plays in the solution of a mystery the official male police refuses to believe as real. Despite the lack of official help and support from the male authorities, the female trio succeeds and delivers the murderer to justice.

Keywords: gender; liminality; non-place; women solidarity; Agatha Christie.

#### Introduction: trains and detective fiction

Walter Benjamin discusses the resemblance between the railway journey and detective fiction in a short article, entitled “Detective Novels, on Journeys”, published in 1930.<sup>1</sup> In this brief piece, Benjamin writes that railway travellers prefer to purchase detective novels at the train station, rather than take it from the shelves at home, trusting the options the railway bookstalls offer, contributing to the production of what Laura Marcus defines «railway fiction» (Marcus 2000, p. 209). Benjamin claims a detective novel is an essential reading for railway journeys because its thrills and suspense alleviate

---

<sup>1</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Detective Novels, on Journeys”, *Verso Books*. Web. 18 Oct. 2020

the traveller's anxieties. A train journey is a «succession of mythic trials and perils» from the anxiety of being «too late» to «the loneliness of the compartment», from «the fear of missing a connection» to «the dread of the unknown hall» (Benjamin 1930). For Benjamin, these fears could be relieved by reading fiction that provokes another type of anxiety. The detective novel becomes, for Benjamin, a momentary escape from the fears associated with travelling.

Laura Marcus has argued that as a genre, detective fiction is «near-contemporaneous with the expansion of the railways and railway travel» (Marcus 2000, p. 209). In “Oedipus Express: Trains, Trauma and Detective Fiction”, she has observed how railway stations, with their bookstalls selling popular fiction, especially in the form of cheap and handy novels, have contributed to the spread of detective fiction. The commuters could purchase cheap books in the train stations to entertain themselves during the wait or during the journey. For Marcus, the railways' rushing modernity has a connotation of mystery. As it erased the distance it also increased the passengers' anxieties. This was due to the fact that the space of a train was often connected with crimes as the railway itself multiplied the possibilities of encounters with strangers, a distinctive feature of modern life. The strangers travelling in the same compartment could be thieves or assassins, as Ian Carter has argued in his work *Railways and Culture in Britain: The Epitome of Modernity*, where, starting from the impact the train had in the British society, he discusses crime fiction and its fascination with railways: «People in your compartment might dissemble» (Carter 2001, p. 216).

Fictional trains are usually dangerous locales in detective fiction but they assure the readers, to quote Carter, that «unreason – robbery, fraud, murder – will not disrupt the modern world's smooth progress [...] social life returns to its usual, boring round. Normal service is resumed, strictly to timetable» (Carter 2001, p. 225). The train, as the epitome of linearity, metaphorically symbolises the detective's journey and the reader's imaginary one towards the terminus, that is the disclosure of the murderer. Mobility is what detective fiction and the train have in common. However, while the train functions as a symbol for linearity and onward motion, the detective's journey is a journey that gives an illusion of linearity, since detective fiction is characterised by what Dennis Porter defines «an act of recovery: moving forward to move back» (Porter 1981, p. 29). Similarly, Alison Light discusses the genre's backward motion: «Yet this kind of crime fiction works [...] by being told backwards, with the full forward narration of events only coming in retrospect in the closing chapters. Much of our time as readers is spent 'Back-tracking'» (Light

1991, p. 91). According to Carter, the train settings are convenient in crime fiction because they offer «intriguing variations on that classic device, the sealed room» (Carter 2001, p. 219), a statement that turns out to be true if Christie's novels set on the rails are taken into consideration. For the Queen of Crime, the train is a narrative stratagem she employs to reproduce the same closeness of the setting she loved the most: the bounded space of a country house.

### Christie's passion for railways

Christie had a real-life passion for railways: «trains have always been one of my favourite things»<sup>2</sup>, she declares in her *Autobiography*. From her penchant for the English commuter trains to her luxurious journeys by the Orient Express, her oeuvre reveals the author's fascination for the railways. She wrote her first train detective novel in 1928, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, adapted from the 1923 Poirot short-story *The Plymouth Express*. The year of the publication – the year «I hate recalling» (AB, p. 346) – marks a difficult period in the author's life. The failure of her first marriage and her clamorous disappearance influence the success of the novel. Robert Barnard has defined it as «Christie's least favourite story, which she struggled with just before and after the disappearance» (Barnard 1980, p. 200). The writing of *The Mystery of the Blue Train* was a torment for Christie. Her mother's death and her husband's infidelity had left a deep scar on the author. The necessity to make money had forced her to write the novel without any personal pleasure. In her *Autobiography* she reveals «I have always hated *The Mystery of the Blue Train* [...] I cannot say I have ever been proud of it» (AB, p. 358). The story revolves around the assassination of a young American heiress, murdered while travelling by the luxurious Blue Train headed to the French Riviera. However, the motif of the train detains a very marginal role, considering that most of the events take place between London and the Mediterranean coastline in the south of France. Something similar happens in *The A.B.C. Murders*. The novel was published in 1936, during a very prolific decade for the author, when several of her masterpieces were published. The events do not unfold within the circumscribed train space. As a matter of fact, no trains appear during the narration, but the story is constructed following the strict train timetables. The title refers to the name of a railway guide which the murderer drops near

---

<sup>2</sup> Agatha Christie, *An Autobiography*, London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001, p. 363. Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as AB.

each corpse. The homicides are committed according to a rigorous alphabetical order referring to the sequence of the ABC railway guides.

The railway motif finds its best expression in *Murder on the Orient Express* (1934) and in *4.50 from Paddington* (1957). While the first novel is set on the luxurious Orient Express, the latter reproduces the experience of travelling by a commuter train departing from Paddington station in London. *Murder on the Orient Express* is one of the most famous murder cases solved by the cosmopolitan Hercule Poirot. *4.50 from Paddington*, on the contrary, sees an elderly Miss Marple struggling with her decaying health and the lost identity of a mysterious corpse. Both novels deal with the train as a space characterised by anonymity and mobility. Whereas the first is completely set on the train – with the only exception of the incipit scene – the latter shifts from the non-place of the train to the domestic space of a country house. Both crimes apparently seem to be public affairs, but eventually the detectives disclose their domestic nature. The two trains circumscribe the action to a small area as it always happens in Christie's family dramas.

#### *4.50 from Paddington*: The gendered perception of spaces

Miss Marple's *4.50 from Paddington* is the object of this study. The analysis commences with the emphasis on the binary opposition between public and private spheres in order to draw attention to the gendering of these spaces. The conventional dichotomies of male–female, public–private, mobility–immobility and worldly–domestic are evident within the narration. The novel is constructed on the binary opposition between male and female spaces, with the train as the emblem of mobility and the house of Rutherford Hall as the epitome of stasis. Moreover, the study highlights the fundamental role women solidarity plays in the solution of a mystery the official police refuse to believe as real. Despite the lack of official help and support from the male authorities, the female trio succeeds and delivers the murderer to justice.

The title refers to a train departing from Paddington station in London which is scheduled to leave at ten minutes before five o' clock in the afternoon. After an intense day of shopping in the capital, Elspeth McGillicuddy is travelling in an empty train compartment few days before the Christmas holidays. As another train pulls up alongside hers, she gazes idly out of the windowpane into the first-class carriage now opposite. The scene she witnesses is shocking: a man is strangling a woman. She immediately reports what she has witnessed to the appropriate authorities but no one seems to believe her, with the exception of her old friend Miss Marple, who sets out to discover where the

assassin has concealed the body. The two ladies repeat together the train journey from London by the 4.50 Paddington train and notice that a sharp curve causes the train to slow down somewhere on the edge of a vast estate, known as Rutherford Hall. The murdered woman's body must be concealed within its premises. Thus, the events move from the public space of the train to the domestic space of the country house and the story develops, to quote Robert Barnard, «into a good old family murder» (Barnard 1980, p. 194).

The novel is shaped around the dichotomy between urban-domestic and male-female spaces. The train is denoted as a man-oriented space where women are relegated to marginal roles and are completely invisible in the mass of men strolling around the station and in the train compartments. Within this highly-gendered space Mrs McGillicuddy struggles to make her voice heard. The male railway personnel treat her with disregard. She is travelling first class but the porter takes her to the third class, without asking for her ticket. « 'I'm travelling first-class,' said Mrs McGillicuddy. 'You didn't say so,' grumbled the porter [...] Mrs McGillicuddy who *had* said so, did not argue the point»<sup>3</sup>. Once she has witnessed the brutal murder through the windowpane, she reports it to the ticket collector, since «some immediate action was necessary» (4.50 FP, p. 7). However, he does not believe her. His eyes drop to the open magazine lying on the seat, with the image of a man strangling a woman on the front cover. He evidently believes that the detective story she is reading has affected her imagination.

He said persuasively: 'Now you don't think, madam, that you'd been reading an exciting story, and that you just dropped off, and awaking a little confused--' Mrs McGillicuddy interrupted him. 'I saw it' she said. 'I was wide awake as you are' (4.50 FP, p. 8).

When Mrs McGillicuddy passes what she has witnessed on to the ticket collector, she is instantly aware of the impression she might have left on him. She fears that he might dismiss her as «hysterical» (4.50 FP, p.14), one of those «elderly women travelling around, fully convinced that they had unmasked communist plots, were in danger of being murdered, saw flying saucers and secret space ships, and reported murders that had never taken place» (4.50 FP, p.9). As no corpse is discovered shortly after Elspeth's «extraordinary story» (4.50 FP, p.14), the credibility of her account is further diminished,

---

<sup>3</sup> Agatha Christie, *4.50 from Paddington*, London: Fontana 1983, pp. 5-6.

Further references are to this edition and will be cited parenthetically in the text as 4.50 FP.

resulting in no legal action taken by the male authorities. Her status as an elderly woman discriminates her. As Angela Devas claims, Mrs McGillicuddy is portrayed with typical characteristics of the female gender: «dotty, deluded, or dreaming – all supposedly normal attributes of the ‘feminine condition,’ especially the middle-aged one» (Devas 2002, p. 259). Elspeth knows a murder was committed but she cannot get the male authorities to believe her. She writes a note addressed to the Stationmaster's office; she recalls the accident to Sergeant Cornish; she tries to convince the ticket collector that what she saw was real. The absence of the corpse justifies the disbelief of both the police and the railway authorities.

Elspeth is left to doubt what she witnessed until she discusses the matter with her friend Jane Marple. The spinster detective knows that actions must be taken to find the disappeared corpse. Not having received support from the male authorities, Miss Marple, driven by the need to give justice to both her friend and the dead woman, decides to investigate the matter relying completely on women's help. It is female solidarity that untangles the mystery, as Devas maintains. Elspeth the eye witness needs Miss Marple to prove the credibility and reliability of her account. Miss Marple, from her side, is struggling with her decaying health that discourages her from taking any active part in the investigation. «But the next step involved action – a good deal of action – the kind of action for which she, herself, was physically unfit» (4.50 FP, p. 24). She assumes the role of the armchair detective, as Marion Shaw and Sabine Vanacker discuss (Shaw & Vanacker 1991, p. 84), coordinating the detection process from her sitting-room, while leaving the investigations to Lucy Eyelesbarrow, an Oxford graduate, who works undercover as the housekeeper in Rutherford Hall, the household where Miss Marple believes the corpse was likely to be disposed. The three women work together to uncover a crime that, to quote Angela Devas, «was dismissed by the police as never having taken place» (Devas 2002, p. 261). Each one of them contributes to the final success: Elspeth witnesses and denounces the accident, Lucy investigates in order to find the place where the body was concealed and Miss Marple uncovers the murderer through the clues found by Lucy and the evidence offered by Elspeth. The ways the three women support each other through the invisible bond of sisterhood culminate in the final triumph.

Supported by Elspeth's recollections and descriptions, Miss Marple repeats the journey from Paddington and, just when she is about to drop the plan to seek out an explanation, she notices that a sharp curve on a high embankment enforces the commuter train to slow down providing a way to dispose of the body. It is below this high



embankment that the railway encircles the property of Rutherford Hall, a country house belonging to the Crackenthorpe family. When the focus moves from the train to the country side, the action shifts from the male-oriented space of the train to the domestic space of the house. Miss Marple assumes a secondary role, leaving the investigations to Lucy, the Oxford genius.

Lucy, who has «taken a First in Mathematics at Oxford» (4.50 FP, p. 25), belongs to those Christie's women that, Susan Rowland argues, find «true happiness within the world of family rather than employment» (Rowland 2001, p. 158). Lucy, both highly educated and autonomous, drops the possibility of a university career to dedicate herself to the housework, becoming a very expensive domestic maid. When Lucy arrives at Rutherford Hall to cover the position of the housekeeper, she does not awaken any suspicions since women are expected to pursue occupations within the domestic field (men, by contrast, are required to work outside the house). She disguises herself through the flawless performance of the role the Crackenthorpe family requires from her: she is an excellent cook, she cleans, she does the wash-up, she stokes the boiler and takes care of every family member. She exploits her gendered position as a disguise to carry on the investigation and find the body, just like Miss Marple takes advantage of her marginal status as a spinster to conceal her detective skills. Lucy ingeniously plays golf around the neglected garden of the estate, an activity that enables her to find the body concealed in an antique sarcophagus, in an abandoned barn near the house. The sarcophagus becomes the emblem of the house itself, neglected, old and deserted. Lucy is so careful to play in the most credible way the role Miss Marple has assigned her that the attention she devotes to the Crackenthorpe family, and her kind manners, alleviate the discontent that lingers in the house. At the end Lucy, acknowledged as the possible solution to the family problems, receives several proposals of marriage by the men of the household. Miss Marple makes it clear that Lucy herself will choose her husband.

The narration is constructed on the binary opposition between the train and the house, that, as Chris Ewer has discussed, sets up a dialogue between mobility, epitomised by the Paddington train and domesticity, epitomised by Rutherford Hall (Ewer 2016). The train, used outside the supposedly feminine, private sphere of the home, projects an overwhelmingly masculine image: dynamic, dominating and utilitarian. It opposes the ideal of genteel femininity that the historian Barbara Welter defines «true womanhood» (Welter 1966, p. 151) and that she associates with domesticity and the private. While railroads embody progress and mobility, the country house embodies stasis. As human



mobility takes place outside the domestic space, women, as the personification of domesticity, are denied that freedom of movement associated with transport, traditionally a male-dominated sector. In *4.50 from Paddington* only the male characters use the train – with the exception of Mrs McGillicuddy. The way in which Elspeth is treated by the male railway authorities highlights the fact that she, as an elderly woman, is not meant to move in such spaces freely. She is seen as a ‘trespasser’ in a space to which she does not belong. When she moves within the space of the station, she observes how the platforms are patronised by a refined male clientele and she hardly notices any women.

The perception of spaces in *4.50 from Paddington* is highly-gendered. The train, and therefore the city, stands for the distant, the public, the unknown, for a sense of displacement, or homelessness. The urban environment in which buildings and streets are traditionally male-made, is a space associated with business, politics and employment, coded as male. By contrast, the house, the woman’s realm, is associated with nurturing, belonging and domesticity, where women carry on their roles for the family’s sake. This gendered division of work is evident in *4.50 from Paddington*. Harold, Cedric and Alfred Crackenthorpe pursue their economic and social ambitions outside the domestic walls. They use the Paddington line every Christmas, when they visit their old father. Emma, their only sister – the other one, Edith, died few years before – discloses that self-sacrificial spirit typical of the angel in the house. She has given up the possibility to leave the house roof to look after her elderly father. As the years are passing, Emma is doomed to remain a spinster.

### Liminal spaces

According to the anthropologist Victor Turner, liminality is the condition of being «betwixt and between» (Turner 1979) or in transition. Borrowing from Arnold van Gennep’s analysis of rites of passage, Turner used liminality to refer to the middle phase of a process of change composed of three different stages: the separation, the liminality and the re-aggregation. For Turner, liminality is the transition phase where an individual is in the process of moving, in transition from one status to another. The word liminal, as a concept associated with a condition of in-betweenness and precariousness, is often used to describe specific thresholds, those spaces that both separate and join spaces. A liminal space is a place of transition between the old and the new, between the familiar and the completely unknown. In the forward to the volume *Landscapes of Liminality: Between Space and Place*, Robert J. Tally argues that «the concept of liminality lies somewhere

between space and place» (Tally 2016, p. x), between the distinction that the cultural geographer Yu Fu Tuan offers of the two: place is a site of security and familiarity, whereas space is a site characterised by freedom and uncertainty (Tuan 2001, p. 6). Liminality, according to Tally, oscillates between place and space, between the familiar and the unknown. In the wake of Tally's definition of liminality, the editors of the volume emphasise the simultaneous nature of liminal spaces, «those which are, simultaneously, place *and* space. They are familiar, yet unknown; they are secure, yet intimidating» (Downey, Kinane & Parker 2016, p. 3).

Rutherford Hall, a dilapidated and ghostly house, occupies the slippery space that is neither town nor countryside. Situated in an in-between space that functions as a portal between the town and the world outside, the house marks a boundary between two worlds: the past and the future, the tradition and the progress, between stillness and motion, the domestic and the public. Erected on the outskirts of Brackhampton in an area that constitutes the limen of the town, it is encircled by the railway line and, in the distance, «ringed round now with building estates and small suburban houses» (4.50 FP, p. 28). The house has lost its past magnificence whether through war damage or through neglect. The gloomy façade reflects the interior space. The rooms are desperately cold and full of heavy mahogany Victorian furniture. Buildings in ruins and fields overgrown with weeds characterise the surrounding premises. On the other side of the railway – which encircles the entire mansion – the town of Brackhampton stands in the distance. «You hear the traffic a bit when the wind's that way – but otherwise it's still country» (4.50 FP, p. 33). The train running along the borders of the property epitomises the wave of modernity which passes without affecting the grounds. «Bustling urban life», says Lucy, «goes on all around it, but doesn't touch it» (4.50 FP, p. 39). The train – symbol of mobility, technological advance and linearity – represents the motion towards the future and the progress. The country house of Rutherford Hall struggles to find its place within this new modern era. It is still anchored to its past glory. Located in the liminal space of the town margins, it has lost the powerful role it once detained within the surrounding area. Now, neglected weeds conceal the disappearing splendour of a house which is waiting to be swallowed up by the impending supermodernity and transformed into «a nursing home or a school» (4.50 FP, p. 159). Whereas the train denotes the inevitable movement towards the future, Rutherford Hall designates the nostalgic emblem of a vanishing era: the epoch of the great country houses. Moreover, the antagonism between the commuter train and the Hall is exemplified in the opposition between mobility and stillness. The

dynamism of the train contrasts with the static space of the house. Michel de Certeau, in his influential book *The Practice of Everyday Life*, has argued that the train «inscribes, indefinitely, the injunction to pass on; it is its order written in a single but endless line: go, leave, this is not your country, and neither is that» (de Certeau 1988, p. 112). The railway produces a rationalisation of space which merely comprehends the onward motion and inevitably excludes or mock women, often associated with stasis, as it is the case with Mrs McGillicuddy.

Michel de Certeau claims that inside the railroad car is a place of order where everything is in its right and proper place. It is «traveling incarceration» where the «unchanging traveller is pigeonholed, numbered and regulated in the grid of the railway car» (de Certeau 1988, 111). The journey is characterised by immobility: the passengers perform certain bodily functions in logically organised and designated places. For the most part, they sit, immobile, and look out the window pane at other immobile objects—the nocturnal lights on the sea, the villages, the night sky, the buildings fading in the distance. The internal immobility is mirrored in the external immobility. The window discloses objects that, like the passengers, become still and fixed. It is the windowpane, for de Certeau, that acts as an intermediary between the immobility of the inside and the immobility of the outside. The windowpane strengthens the sensation of being spatially separated from what it is outside since it is, to quote De Certeau, «what allow us to see [...] it creates the spectator's distance: You shall not touch; the more you see, the less you hold» (de Certeau 1988, 112).

Thresholds like borders, doorways, passages and windows are associated with liminality. Liminality designates sites which are betwixt and between, neither one place nor the other, those sites that separates but also connects the inside and the outside. Transition is the prerogative of liminality. As a liminal space, the windowpane produces a panoramic view of what is beyond its borders, but it is a mere act of observation. It is a boundary which separates the viewer from the outside world. Images fly past the carriage window but soon fade away into the distance.

In *4.50 from Paddington* it is the liminal space of the windowpane, through which Mrs McGillicuddy witnesses the murder, that operates to connect the anonymous space of the train to the private and domestic space of the house. The window in the novel becomes a transitional place, which provides not just a frame for seeing, but a movement between two worlds, the public and the private, between «the flying countryside [...] and the interior space» (Marcus 2000, p. 217). For Gillian Beer, the window suggests the

«mingling of inner and outer» (Beer 2011, p. 6). It allows us «to be in two scenes at once» (Beer 2011, p. 5), as a liminal bond between the inside and the outside. Beer argues that windows embrace connection but also exclusion, as they offer «sight, but not the intimacy of touch or taste» (Beer 2011, p. 8). This is what occurs in *4.50 from Paddington*, where Elspeth glances into the outside world through the transparent threshold of the glass window, but she is denied any entrance. She sees but is not able to intervene. The train window becomes both medium and barrier.

For the French anthropologist Marc Augé, the modern-day environment has undergone such radical changes that non-places are flourishing; that is, places concerned with transport, transit, commerce and leisure, places concerned with the consumption of services (Augé 2008). Seen from this perspective, the train itself and the railway stations seem to readily fit with the idea of non-place; they are sites of supermodernity that differ from the anthropological places defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity. As a site characterised by transience, openness and mobility, the traveller in the non-place of the railway is denied any sense of identity. He/she is merely a consumer. In *4.50 from Paddington*, the anonymity of the non-place of the train facilitates the blurring of the identities of both the victim and the murderer. «There is something so anonymous about a train [...] a train is full of strangers coming and going» (4.50 FP, p. 38-39). Only when Miss Marple, with the precious help of Lucy, can localise the body away from the non-place of the train, the real identities of both the victim and the murderer can be revealed. As Geoffrey Hartman has argued, «to solve a crime in detective stories means to give it an exact location» (Hartman 2004, p. 165). Once that location is discovered to be Rutherford Hall, the two strangers observed by Mrs McGillicuddy eventually acquire a name. From anonymous passengers they become who they really are. Dr Quimper – old Mr Crackenthorpe's personal doctor – killed his French wife because he saw a chance of marrying a rich woman, Emma Crackenthorpe, to inherit the entire property of Rutherford Hall and the family fortune. The murderer is the only one among the male characters of the novel who declares, on more than one occasion, he does not use the Paddington line, thus encouraging the readers to suspect the Crackenthorpe brothers, who are regular visitors of the 4.50 commuter train. The doctor owns a car, a fact that excludes him from any possible suspicion.

In the concluding remarks, Miss Marple forces the assassin to repeat his murderous act in the intimacy of the living room of Rutherford Hall. The space of the living room recalls the circumscribed spatial structure of the train compartment but this time the

absence of the windowpane enables Mrs McGillicuddy and the police to lay hands on the assassin. In the end the three women, Elspeth, Lucy and Miss Marple re-unite for the last performance of their role. Their victory reveals the failure of the male authoritative powers, that had previously rejected helping them.

### Conclusion

In *4.50 from Paddington* the binary opposition between male and female spaces is epitomised in the contrasting relationship between the train and the country house. The train, emblem of modernity, mobility and innovation, opposes with the image of Rutherford Hall, emblem of stasis and of a past that is slowly vanishing. The perception of spaces within the novel is highly gendered. The train is constructed as a masculine space, where Mrs McGillicuddy struggles to make her voice heard. Her age and gender discriminate her. As an elderly woman, she is believed to be dotty and unreliable. She is left to question what she witnessed as the male authorities refuse to believe her story.

The country house, by contrast, is portrayed as a woman's place, as women are traditionally believed to be caretaker and nurturer, those who perform domestic duties. Mobility, traditionally a man's prerogative, equates men with the public, urban space. Domesticity equates women with the home, the private, the domestic space, hence with limited movement. In *4.50 from Paddington* the doctrine of two spheres, that places women in the private sphere of the home and men in the public and urban-oriented domain of employment, industry and business, is evident in the characters' family relationships. Whereas the Crackenthorne brothers follow their ambitions in the public domain of the city, Emma the spinster has no other choice but to look after the elderly patriarch. She is portrayed as the typical angel in the house, powerless and self-sacrificing.

The liminal space of the windowpane, through which Mrs McGillicuddy witnesses the murder that sets the plot in motion, operates to connect the public space of the train to the private and domestic space of the house. The window in the novel becomes a transitional place, which provides not just a frame for seeing, but a movement between two worlds, the public and the private, the city and the countryside. The concluding remarks disclose the fundamental role women solidarity plays within the novel. As the whodunit unfolds, the female trio, Elspeth, Jane Marple and Lucy, avenges the superficiality with which the official authorities had previously treated and mocked them.

The novel celebrates female bonding and demonstrates the power of female solidarity at work.

### *References*

- Augé, Marc. *Non-places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 2008.
- Barnard, Robert. *A Talent to Deceive. An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*. London: Fontana, 1980.
- Beer, Gillian. "Doors, windows, entries. Windows: looking in, looking out, breaking through", in S. Mukherji (Ed.), *Thinking on Thresholds: The Poetics of Transitive Spaces*, London; New York: Anthem Press, 2011. 3-16.
- Benjamin, Walter. "Detective Novels, on Journeys" (1930). *Verso Books*. 18 Oct. 2020 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/2848-detective-novels-on-tour>
- Cabibbo, Paola (Ed). *Sulla soglia. Questioni di liminalità in letteratura*. Roma: Il Calamo, 1993.
- Carter, Ian. *Railways and Culture in Britain: The Epitome of Modernity*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001.
- Christie, Agatha. *An Autobiography*. London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2001.
- Christie, Agatha. *4.50 from Paddington*. London: Fontana, 1983.
- de Certeau, Michel. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Berkeley: University of California Press 1988.
- Devas, Angela. "Murder, Mass Culture, and the Feminine: A View from the 4.50 from Paddington", *Feminist Media Studies*, 2.2 (2002): 251-265.
- Downey, Dara, Ian Kinane, Elizabeth Parker. *Landscapes of Liminality. Between Space and Place*, London/New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016.
- Ewers, Chris. "Genre in Transit: Agatha Christie, Trains and the Whodunit." *Journal of Narrative Theory* 46.1 (2016): 97-120.
- Hartman, Geoffrey. "Literature High and Low: The Case of the Mystery Story", in G. Hartman and D. T. O'Hara (Eds.), *The Geoffrey Hartman Reader*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2004: 164-179.
- Light, Alison. *Forever England: Femininity, Literature, and Conservatism between the Wars*. London, UK: Routledge, 1991.
- Makinen, Merja. *Agatha Christie Investigating Femininity*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006.

- Marcus, Laura. "Oedipus Express: Trains, Trauma and Detective Fiction", in W. Chernaik, M. Swales & R. Vilain (Eds.), *The Art of Detective Fiction*. Basingstoke/New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2000: 201-221.
- Mezei, Kathy & Chiara Briganti (Eds.). *The Domestic Space Reader*. Toronto/Buffalo/London: University of Toronto Press, 2012.
- Porter, Dennis. *The Pursuit of Crime: Art and Ideology in Detective Fiction*. New Heaven: Yale University Press, 1981.
- Rowland, Susan. *From Agatha Christie to Ruth Rendell: British Women Writers in Detective and Crime Fiction*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001.
- Shaw, Marion and Sabine Vanacker. *Reflecting on Miss Marple*. London/New York: Routledge, 1991.
- Tally Robert T. Jr. "'A Utopia to the In-Between', or Limning the Liminal", in D. Downey, I. Kinane, E. Parker (Eds.), *Landscapes of Liminality. Between Space and Place*. London/New York: Rowman and Littlefield, 2016. ix-xv.
- Tuan, Yi-Fu, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001.
- Turner, Victor. "Betwixt and Between: The Liminal Period in the Rites of Passage", in W.A. Lessa, E.Z. Vogt, J.M. Watanabe (Eds.), *Reader in Comparative Religion: An Anthropological Approach*. New York: Harper and Row, 1979: 234-243
- Welter, Barbara. "The Cult of True Womanhood: 1820-1860". *American Quarterly* 18.2 (1966): 151-174.

Debora A. Sarnelli ha conseguito un dottorato di ricerca in Studi Letterari, Linguistici e Storici presso l'Università degli Studi di Salerno, e un Master di II livello in Traduzione letteraria presso l'Università di Pisa. Attualmente assegnista di ricerca presso l'OGEPO, Osservatorio per le Pari Opportunità e gli Studi di Genere dell'Università degli Studi di Salerno, collabora nel team del Project Coordinator al progetto europeo H2020 R&I PEERS "pilot experiences for improving gender equality in research organisations". I suoi interessi di ricerca spaziano dalla geografia letteraria agli studi di genere.



Debora A. Sarnelli holds a PhD in Literary, Linguistic and Historical Studies from the University of Salerno. She holds, as well, a second level Master in Literary Translation from the University of Pisa.

She is currently research fellow in the OGEPO - Monitoring Centre for Gender Equality and Gender Studies at the University of Salerno. She collaborates in the Project Coordinator team of the European Project H2020 R&I PEERS - «pilot experiences for improving gender equality in research organisations ».

Her research interests include various issues, from Literary Geography to Gender Studies.

LETTI E RILETTI