



folk/ed. Derg, 2020; 26(2): 317-328
DOI: 10.22559/folklor.1147

Spinning the Tale: Spinster Detectives and the Construction of Narrative in the Miss Silver Mysteries

Öykü Ören Kadın Dedektifler ve Miss Silver Polisiyelerinde Anlatının Biçimlendirilmesi

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Abstract

The concept of spinster detective is one that has been relatively understudied, despite general contemporary interest in the detective form as an academic as well as a popular genre. The spinster detective sub-genre has remained on the sidelines, probably because of its utilization of an old woman as the detective. As an alternative to the professional detective, she represents a counter figure who sits comfortably in her chair knitting away as the events revolve around her. It is interesting to note that the word “spinster” itself comes from the act of spinning and spinster detectives from Miss Marple onwards have been frequently represented as old ladies who alternatively knit, crochet, weave, spin, or embroider. This correlation between being unmarried and “spinning” gains a poignant dimension when the actions of detecting and spinning are considered as central to these narratives. What the spinster detective does, in effect, is, she spins a tale; she constructs events in such a way as to explain who committed a crime and how, by forming a narrative out of the evidence. Her narrative is a counter narrative to the dominant presence

Geliş tarihi (Received): 10.01.2020 - Kabul tarihi (Accepted): 11.04.2020

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and construction of the professional detective. This paper aims to reveal how the Miss Silver character in the Patricia Wentworth detective series gains narrative presence in the novels through the act of knitting, and how she gains a legitimate voice through this seemingly passive production.

Keywords: *Miss Silver, spinster detectives, detective fiction, detective novels, female detectives, knitting*

Öz

Polisiye edebiyatın günümüzdeki hem genel hem akademik popülerliğine nazaran “evde kalmış” dedektif hikâyeleri akademik anlamda pek ilgi görmeyen bir alt tür olmuştur. Büyük ihtimalle dedektif tiplemesinin yaşlı bir kadın olmasından dolayı bu tür, revaçta olduğu 1930-1950’lerden sonra az sayıda *üretmiş* ve okuyucusunu kaybetmiştir. Kadın olması, yaşlı olması, incelemeler sırasında pek hareketlilik göstermemesi, zaman içinde daha popüler hale gelen “aksiyon” polisiyeler tarafından gözden düşmesine sebep olmuştur. “Whodunit” (kim yaptı?) tarzı dedektif romanlarında karşılaşılan profesyonel dedektif tiplemesi ile bir tezat oluşturan bu dedektif figürü, olaylar etrafında gelişirken, ya kendi evinde ya da suç mahalinde, bir köşede oturup *örgü örmeyi* ve insanları gözlemlemeyi tercih etmektedir. Bu durumda, İngilizce’de “evde kalmış” kelimesinin “spinster” olması ve bu kelimenin de “spinning”den (iplik eğirme/çekme) gelmesi ilgi çekicidir. Agatha Christie’nin meşhur Miss Marple karakterinden bu yana, hem edebiyatta hem de film uyarlamalarında “spinster” dedektiflerin genel olarak *örgü*, *tığ ören* veya dokumacılık, nakış ile ilgilenen yaşlıca kadınlar olarak betimlenmişlerdir. Hikâyelerdeki “iplik eğirme” işinin hafiyecilik kadar önemli oluşu etkili bir anlatım yöntemidir. Evde kalmış dedektifin yaptığı, kanıtları inceledikten sonra bir olay “örgüsü”nü ortaya çıkarmaktır, suçun neden ve kim tarafından işlendiği bu şekilde ortaya çıkmaktadır, dolayısıyla bu iki işlem arasında mutlak bir bağlantı vardır. Kadın dedektifin ortaya koyduğu anlatı ise sıklıkla polislerin olay incelemesine bir karşıtlık olarak sunulur. Patricia Wentworth’un otuz iki romanında dedektiflik yapan Miss Silver karakteri, her romanda sayısız yeğenleri için mutlaka bir giysi *örmekte*, ve sıklıkla incelemenin sonunda *örgüsünü* de bitirmektedir. Bu yazının amacı da Patricia Wentworth’un romanlarında Miss Silver’in masum görünen *örgü örme* hareketi ile anlatıda varlığını göstermesi arasındaki bağlantıyı incelemektir.

Anahtar sözcükler: *Miss Silver, evde kalmış dedektifler, polisiye edebiyat, polisiye roman, kadın dedektifler, örgü örme*

Introduction

The sub-genre of the spinster detective, although quite popular during the Golden Age of detective fiction, is not one that has been picked up for substantial revision or subversion in recent revivals of the detective fiction genre. Through many critically acclaimed novels labelled postmodern or experimental, such as Umberto Eco’s *The Name of the Rose* or Peter Ackroyd’s *Hawksmoor*, the detective genre has enjoyed a revival and an acceptance within literature. Most of these pseudo-detectives are, generally, young and male (as generally

are the ‘conventional’ detectives that they parody). There may be certain reasons for the lack of modern *spinster* detectives, one of which would be the relatively defunct use of the word *spinster*, as well as the function of the character type in society in general. A woman considered a *spinster* during the first half of the twentieth century would not necessarily be deemed one in Western societies today. Secondly, the rightful call for a feminist, physically strong and hard-boiled type of female detective has pushed the frail old lady detective made popular by Miss Marple into the background. Additionally, the ‘armchair detective’ type, that is, the one who does not budge from their sitting room, solving the entire crime through deduction alone, is fairly out of place among the action-packed cinematic narratives of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries.

Yet, although not quite receiving the same popularity as their contemporaries, from its first incarnation with Anne Katherine Green’s *Amelia Butterworth*¹, the *spinster* detective was firmly established by Miss Marple, Miss Silver, and Stuart Palmer’s *Hildegard Withers*² to plentiful readers. Separated from other fictional professionals by their age, sex, and temperament, they get the job done, as it were, precisely because of these qualities. Frequently but not necessarily juxtaposed against a younger, virile, male detective, their power comes from a narrative agency, the ability to gather evidence and deduct from stories and/or testimonies. In quite a number of cases, they do this whilst employed in another creative ability - knitting, embroidering, or spinning, quite literally putting the story of the crime together as they put a sock, vest or sweater together. Patricia Wentworth’s *Miss Maud Silver* is an extraordinary example of how this counter -detection narrative is constructed. Despite not enjoying much of a physical presence in the novels that bear her name – she hardly ever enters the narrative until about mid-way into the book - she gains the ultimate voice and thus credibility and narrative power through the simultaneous spinning of her yarn and tale.

It is not the case that all *spinster* detectives ‘spin,’ or do handiwork, but a surprising number do, and among these, Miss Marple and Miss Silver are of a higher literary merit. While Miss Marple is often depicted, especially in adaptations of Christie’s works, as knitting, her craft seems to establish a tone and mood that reflects her personality (further emphasized by descriptions of her hair and clothes as fluffy, puffy and woolly and so on) than to serve a practical use. In *A Murder is Announced*, for example, she is described as follows:

She had snow-white hair and a pink crinkled face and very soft innocent blue eyes, and she was heavily enmeshed in fleecy wool. Wool round her shoulders in the form of a lacy cape and wool that she was knitting and which turned out to be a baby’s shawl (1950: 122).

This is in fact a rare example of an instance in which what she is knitting is mentioned, that is, the practical outcome of her knitting process. In the Miss Marple books, more often than not, knitting serves as a motif that constructs character, and helps to establish Miss Marple as a quite harmless, soft, and genial person. Although she does at times challenge this somewhat typical persona, it would be difficult to consider her act of knitting as an effort to legitimize her presence in an investigation. Her act of knitting, therefore, seems more to be an incidental addition to an already typical ‘*spinster*’ character, which is reinforced by the idea that the

word 'spinster' actually derives from the act of spinning, making needlework in general a common activity for women above a certain age who have never been married.

The definition of spinster given in the Compact Edition of the OED (1971), is:

- 1) A woman (or rarely, a man) who spins, esp. one who practices spinning as a regular occupation ,(since 14th century)
 - b. A spider, or other insect that spins (rare)
- 2) Appended to names of women, originally in order to denote their occupation, but subsequently (from the 17th century) as the proper legal designation of the still unmarried.
 - b. A woman still unmarried; esp. one beyond the usual age for marriage; an old maid.

These definitions reveal some parallels and connections that need to be taken into consideration when looking at Miss Silver's act of knitting and how it establishes her narrative presence and agency in Wentworth's novels.

There is first the link between the activity of spinning and gender. Rarely practiced by a man, and during times when so few occupations were offered to women, spinning was a legitimate choice of expression and business when other ways of expression (public speech, physical activity and such) were limited. There is then a firm connection between women, handiwork and narrative. Figuratively, the acts of spinning and weaving have been linked in language to the creative act of writing and storytelling, as is clearly suggested in the expressions "spinning a tale," "weaving magic," and "telling a yarn," in which there is also an added suggestion of the incredible³.

As a social position, the spinster also inhabits a curious space in that she enjoys the freedom of being to a certain degree apart from society while also somewhat stigmatized because of the same reason. Emma Liggins explains in the Introduction to *Odd Women? Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850s-1930s* that,

The woman without heterosexual desire, or a domestic space shared with a husband and children, was stigmatized as 'abnormal, perverted, unnatural.' Yet, the outsider status of lesbians, spinsters, and widows could, and often did, allow them to transgress the norms of female behavior and to stretch the rules governing sexuality which hemmed in conventional wives and mothers (1).

Thus Maud Silver is relatively at more liberty to "detect" various crimes and to have the position as a private investigator⁴. Despite this liberty with time and space, Joan Warthling Roberts points to a different concern of being a spinster detective:

The spinster is of course a woman who is not sexually interesting (if she were, she would have married), is sexually inexperienced, and is dried up and frustrated. The spinster is thus ignored, being of no value to those active in society; she is a busybody, poking and prying into the affairs of others because she has nor affairs of her own. She is expected to be censorious and moralistic, dryly envious of the lives of her neighbors. A spinster solving a mystery is on its face paradoxical. She has no experience with passion or power, so how

could she ever understand the murky motives behind a passionate crime like murder? (7).

Although quite a harsh description, some of this can be seen at work in the Miss Silver mysteries as well as the Miss Marple ones. As has already been mentioned, the fact that the character is largely ignored in society is a liberating matter, one that enables Miss Silver to come and go unfettered and unnoticed. She is, however, most concerned with romantic involvements, and although she does not approve of all liaisons, many of her books reveal an effort to unite lovers.

Miss Silver is a retired governess and school teacher and professional investigator, all of which help her in the observation and evaluation of people (as opposed to the negative stereotype expected of spinsters as revealed above). Although mainly operating through word of mouth thanks to former students and clients, the foremost of whom is Police Inspector Frank Abbott, she does have a business card on which there is the proud inscription, “private investigator” (but does not, of course, advertise, as that would be most un-ladylike). Of indeterminate age – indeed, as opposed to Miss Marple, she does not appear to age throughout the span of 32 novels. A minor character in the first novel in which she is featured (*The Grey Mask*, 1928), she became the main character in the next (*The Case is Closed*, 1937), and enjoyed narrative presence of varying lengths in the next thirty novels, all published from 1939 to 1961.

In these novels, the spinning/knitting activity becomes an emblem of her narrative power, not unlike that of Arachne in myth, who similarly challenged the dominant authority (Athena/Pallas, or, in this analogy, the official detectives on the case) to a weaving (detecting/reasoning) contest. Ovid’s relation of this myth in the *Metamorphoses* shows Athena’s pride in her talent of weaving and her anger towards Arachne, a mere mortal who is extremely talented but denies that her talent comes from the divine Athena. When Arachne refuses to ask for forgiveness, they arrange a weaving duel:

[...] they set up rival looms across
 The room, stretching the weblike threads from beam
 To beam and, where the reeds divided them,
 Flashing their shuttles through with ardent fingers
 while the toothed heddles beat the nap in place (Ovid, 2001: 164).

As Niklas Halzberg also argues, although the two contestants’ distinctly different tapestries are described in detail, there is no real verdict as to whose is better or who wins (128-9). However, what does emerge is Athena’s envy and Arachne’s pride. Angry at the alternative narrative that Arachne has woven into the tapestry, Athena tears it, and then slashes Arachne’s face three times. Arachne’s pride does not accept this cruel punishment, and she decides to kill herself, but Athena prevents this by turning her into a spider:

And as she turned away she sprayed her features
 With droppings from dark herbs of Hecate;

Hair, ears, and nose fell off, the head diminished,
 The body shrivelled, and her quick long fingers
 Grew to its sides with which she crept abroad -
 All else was belly, and the girl a spider,
 The tenuous weaver of an ancient craft (2001: 167).

Arachne's punishment is to continue to weave in a "tenuous" fashion, not to create artwork that would rival the gods. This power struggle between goddess and mortal, and between law and authority and spinsterly investigation can be found in almost all of the Miss Silver mysteries. The parallel is between Arachne and Maud Silver, the spinster who is a rival to the patriarchal law enforcement officials who simultaneously look down on her and envy her. Like Arachne, Miss Silver is unable to voice her frustration or concern through her speech, living as she does in a similarly oppressive hierarchical system; rather than an outward rebellion, she instead concentrates on listening well, and knits as she does so.

Her knitting, then, is not a form of resistance but a tool by which she gains narrative as well as investigative presence in her scenes of detection. As previously noted, Miss Silver is not an active or sometimes not even the main character in the novels that bear her name. In the thirty two novels labelled as "Miss Silver mysteries," the narrative is mostly related from the perspective of a victim, a family member of the victim, or a suspect, who may concurrently be one of the former too. Maud Silver enters the narrative when someone suggests that she should be contacted, and she may or may not make an appearance at the scene of the crime⁵. If she does not, the persons concerned visit her at her house to relate the problem, and there, she knits and she listens, as if each movement of her knitting needles weaves a link in the story⁶. Sometimes she will be visiting close to the scene, or know someone in the same village that she can make up an excuse to go and stay for a while. And often, she will be employed or invited officially. Whichever is the case, this interweaving of listening and constructing (a garment as well as a coherent narrative) is always there, giving an air of dependent synchronicity.

The act also gains her agency conversely through its passiveness, as many of the characters that encounter her do not take her seriously precisely because she sits in a corner, seemingly unmoving, but ferociously knitting, in fact, very much like the spider that Arachne becomes. One character describes her as having "a stony eye and a mouth like a trap" (*The Clock Strikes 12*, 102). Miss Silver continuously knits out of a sense of thrift rather than art. Miss Silver buys wool often with coupons and comments on the difficulty of obtaining the simplest items. In the post-war world that she inhabits, each garment she makes for the various children of her nieces is greatly appreciated as necessities; the narrator of *Death at Deep End*, for example, notes that she is knitting a "useful pair of socks" (200 emphasis mine). Or, in *The Fingerprint*, it is mentioned that "There were always babies who needed shawls, and those knitted by Miss Silver were in continual demand" (152).

Upon seeing her for the first time, official detectives, clients, victims and suspects are in general agreement that "Nobody could have looked less like a detective" (*The Watersplash* 158, *The Ivory Dagger* 76). This is the quality that gives her the power, as suggested by

Dale Stoyer, “Because she appears so harmless, she’s a whiz at undercover work, and is particularly adept at infiltrating the troubled households of the upper class” (par. 3). It is not as an equal that she is able to do this, but it is because of her familiar and nostalgic figure, which appears to evoke fond childhood memories in the members of these households, who find themselves opening up to her without even becoming aware of it.

It is possible to see this at work in *The Clock Strikes 12* where she conducts an essential interview in the following manner:

[Miss Silver] took up her knitting-bag, a Christmas present from Ethel, extracted her needles and a ball of dark grey wool, and said,

‘You are very good.’

About half an inch of the nether part of little Roger’s suit depended from three of the needles. Miss Silver inserted the fourth needle and began to knit with great swiftness and dexterity. After a slight hesitation Miss Paradine sat down in the opposite corner of the settee (111).

Miss Paradine, a character who keeps stum to the end in her interviews with the official investigating policemen, talks with Miss Silver because she regards her as less intimidating because of her knitting, which seems deceptively complex and thus seemingly to be engrossing all Miss Silver’s attention. In the eyes of the people who gaze scornfully at her, Maud Silver’s creative energy masks her mental capacity. It is quite a common motif in the Miss Silver mysteries for an untrusting person to encounter her and then firstly to become accustomed to her presence and then to be taken into her confidence.

The Ivory Dagger, the nineteenth in a series of 32 novels is a representative of how Miss Silver gains power through the interviews that she conducts and how she is able to bring these related stories together to form a coherent investigation of the crime in question. In the conversation that she has with Ray Fortiscue, a member of the family among whom a murder has been committed, the scene begins with Ray’s observation of Miss Silver and her study. She firstly is very skeptical, and “[wonders] what Sybil Dryden imagined this mousy little person was going to be able to do to help Lila and Bill and all of them” (70). A little later on, “Her eyes came back to Miss Silver’s face. The small capable hands were engaged with some soft knitting. She was being looked at in the firm encouraging way which had induced so many clients to open their hearts” (70). On first encounter, a cross between an elderly aunt and a firm schoolmistress, Miss Silver’s mere presence is remarked as being nonthreatening and her employment in handiwork noncommittal, passively encouraging her clients and witnesses to talk. Her seeming passivity in a resting position, always sitting and presumably looking down at her work, seems to give Maud Silver a rootedness that is innocuous and harmonious rather than confrontational. When Ray ruminates on how she came to open up and reveal so much later on, she says, “It might have been the touch of fireside authority carrying her right away back to nursery days. It might have been the pink knitting. She didn’t know and she didn’t care” (73).

While Ray Fortiscue is talking in the interview scene, there are frequent interruptions in the narrative alternatively with “Miss Silver’s needles clicked” (71) and “Miss Silver coughed” (71). These are both common and recurring in the Miss Silver novels. Her silence

when listening, while reassuring the other person, helps her to add more pieces to the puzzle as she adds more stitches to her work. The coughing acts as further comfort to the speaker, who knows that s/he is being listened to and is being encouraged to go on. There is no obtrusive comment or aggressive manipulation as may be practiced in an official interrogation, instead, the gentle cough helps the speaker to gather their thoughts together once more and attempt to relate the incident as clearly as possible. Rarely Miss Silver may also use this same cough for gentle admonishment if the speaker is rambling or arrogant, but not often.

Soon later in *The Ivory Dagger*, when it says, “The needles clicked rather sharply,” (72) her thoughts become quite clear as to how she regards the narrative she is listening to, and her act of knitting, then, becomes her means of communication when she is otherwise silent. There is some critical work that focuses on how alternative means of communication has been utilized by women over the years as a form of resistance against forced silence. Houston and Kramarae, for instance, list “sewing, weaving, embroidering” as “alternative means of expression” (1991: 395). They are seen as alternative since “talk and writing are considered more prestigious methods of expression” (395)⁷. Miss Silver is a rare character who actually uses this alternative quality of her means of expression to her advantage, as is argued here. As Miss Silver “look[s] across the pale pink vest she was knitting for her niece Ethel Burkett’s little Josephine” (71), little markers in the narrative provide her with a chance to meditate on the story. The story itself becomes a garment that is linked by the thread she weaves. The end of the conference between herself and Miss Fortiscue is quite clearly marked when “Miss Silver [puts] her knitting away in a flowered chintz bag” (74). As Houston and Kramarae clarify, “Breaking out of silence means more than being empowered to speak or write, it also means controlling the form as well as the content of one’s own communication, the power to develop and to share one’s own unique voice” (1991, p. 389). Here we see how Miss Silver distinctly dominates and controls the interview by manipulating the silence during which she constructs the narrative through the act of knitting.

Sitting in the living room of the country house that she has had herself invited to, Miss Silver interviews the inhabitants one by one, and each helps her to put the story together as she puts little Josephine’s vest together. With Lady Dryden, for example, “As her needles clicked and the pale pink vest revolved, Miss Silver agreed that romance was not always practicable” (87), and with Mr. Haile, “If she was aware of exasperation, it did not interfere with the progress of little Josephine’s vest. She continued to knit smoothly and rapidly, and to regard him in a gently expectant manner” (89). Throughout the novel she completes three vests for her niece’s daughter as she completes the case.

As previously noted, her ability to form a coherent explanation to how crimes are committed is closely linked to her act of knitting and the way she listens to those involved without prejudice. Always looked up to by Frank Abbott, a former student, and Randal Marsh, whose governess she once was, and who becomes Chief Constable, she is treated in a condescending manner by other professional detective and policemen. Chief Inspector Lamb, cynical at every encounter, for instance, makes a very suggestive remark when he grudgingly remarks,

I won't say that Miss Silver doesn't come in handy here and there when it comes to that [talking with reluctant people]. No, I'll give her her due – she knows people, and she sees through 'em. If she'd lived a couple of hundred years ago she'd have been in the way of getting herself ducked for a witch. [...] But I've often wondered about those old women; whether there wasn't something in it. Poison and such like (187).

Although seemingly giving Miss Silver “her due,” he links her method of investigation to that of a witch, suggesting that her talent has no relation with the normal way of doing things, but an otherworldly accident. This is the way in which Miss Silver becomes an Arachne like figure, in this challenge to authority who refuses to accept her talent the way it is. Despite using similar methods of deduction and inference, CI Lamb only grudgingly admits that she can be useful in an alternative way, a way that he links to witchcraft.

While discussing Amelia Butterworth in “Amelia Butterworth: The Spinster Detective,” Joan Warthling Roberts says of the spinster and the sleuth duality that,

Together, they are a contradiction in terms that sets us up for comedy: a sharp-nosed old bag of bones, officious or self-righteous, pokes into people's business -preferably with a knitting needle- giving us the same opportunity for snide laughter that the official male detective in the story enjoys at the woman detective's expense (1995: 6).

This reminds one of the many times that Miss Marple holds her own against such characters that blatantly make fun of her appearance or attempts at investigation. Yet, in cannot really be said to be the same for Miss Silver⁸. She is, nonetheless, professional in the sense that she is officially employed on a case, and although the reader never witnesses money changing hands, it is more than suggested that she is paid for each case. Each encounter is a stressful one, more for the male detective than for Miss Silver (it is helpful to remember Athena's frustration here) as they are the ones caught by surprise. Of Superintendent Martin in *The Silent Pool* it is remarked that, “He felt like a man who is doing a jigsaw puzzle and to whom an intrusive stranger proffers the missing piece. Gratitude is very seldom the reward of the onlooker who sees more of the game than you do yourself” (157). In this description Miss Silver's aptitude and ease in investigation is brought into the foreground. In the same novel, as Martin starts remembering Miss Silver's involvement in other cases, he thinks about the other officers' reactions to her detection, “He was remembering what he had heard. Crisp had been angry and jealous, but she had been right, and he had been wrong. And Crisp was no fool” (159-60). In her relations with the officers she encounters, then, it is often not the detective who finds the situation amusing (as suggested by Roberts above, albeit concerning Amelia Butterworth), but it is certainly the reader who feels that justice has been served. Miss Silver herself never needs to prove her worth and she does not feel the need to legitimize herself for the benefit of the officers.

It is clear that Miss Silver would have made an excellent professional detective if she had lived at a later date. Her pride in her accomplishment for her time is evident in *The Silent Pool* which provides a rare insight into her thoughts:

During twenty years of her life she had expected nothing more than to be a governess in other people's houses, and to retire eventually upon some very small pittance. Then suddenly there had opened before her a completely new way of life. Equipped with strong moral principles, a passion for justice, and a gift for reading the human heart, she had entered upon a career as a private detective. She was not unknown to Scotland Yard. Chief Detective Inspector Lamb had a high esteem for her. If it was sometimes tinged with exasperation, this did not interfere with an old and sincere friendship. Inspector Frank Abbott in moments of irreverence declared that his esteemed Chief suspected "Maudie" or powers alarmingly akin to witchcraft—but then it is notorious that this brilliant officer sometimes allows himself to talk in a very extravagant manner (6-7).

Despite her "moral principles," "passion," and "talent" she is even here depicted as an outsider to the group of male detectives that operate within the system. Lamb's esteem is clouded by his comparison of her success to witchcraft. The tongue-in-cheek comment on the brilliancy of Lamb's observations in relation to their extravagance does little to raise the bar Miss Silver is forced to remain under because of her age and gender, just like the manner in which Arachne has to continue with her "tenuous" crafting. Her craft is tenuous and negligible, both with her cases and with her handiwork, most of which serve a very practical purpose. Rather than battling with the officers head to head, as suggested earlier, Miss Silver prefers to create an alternative space for herself where she has no peers.

Many of the Miss Silver cases conclude with the completion of the garment being knitted as well as the clarification of the crime under investigation. The end of her final conversation in *The Clock Strikes 12*, for example, goes: "The last stitch left the last needle. Little Roger's leggings dropped completed upon Miss Silver's lap. 'Let us think of pleasanter things' she said (205). And, just like her many of her interviews, the novel itself ends with the reader being politely reminded that the work is done: "Miss Silver rolled up little Roger's leggings and put them away in her knitting-bag together with the needles and a half-finished ball of dark grey wool" (205). The rolling up of the finished work suggests how she has another crime solved under her belt, just as the author has another Miss Silver mystery completed. All of the mysteries studied in this paper end with the knitted object being finished simultaneously with the decoding of the crime, and there is no book that does not feature Miss Silver gaining and retaining narrative power through her knitting. She knits throughout each book and mystery, beginning each project when she becomes involved in the investigation and ending them with her resolution of the crime.

Endnotes

- 1 As Mentioned by Cheri Louise Ross in *Great Women Mystery Writers: Classic to Contemporary*, Anna Katherine Green is “universally honored as ‘The Mother of Detective Fiction’” (1994, p.143). Amelia Butterworth is “fiftyish, upper-middle class, and most respectable, is the first woman detective in American literature to challenge the accepted role of women. [. . .] Totally unlike the previous women detectives, Butterworth is, instead, a precursor of Agatha Christie’s Jane Marple, who is probably the best-known example of the amateur, unmarried, woman detective” (142). Anna Katherine Green in fact started writing mysteries nearly a decade before Arthur Conan Doyle, who was her contemporary. After her novel *The Leavenworth Case* became a bestseller, “there is a legend that the Pennsylvania legislature held a heated debate, [. . .] arguing over what man really wrote it since ‘the story was manifestly beyond a woman’s powers’” (Higgins 1996, p. 137).
- 2 Sometimes referred to as “the American Miss Marple,” (Mallory par. 10) Hildegard Withers is actually more similar to Miss Silver in that she is “Proudly old-fashioned, she is popular with her third-grade students, with whom she tries to be stern, but her affection for them usually shows through. When it comes to adults, however, she suffers no fools, yet through it all remains a closet romantic” (Mallory par. 2). Palmer’s detective does not seem to have withstood the test of time, despite having been adapted onto screen, because it is extremely difficult to find copies of the Withers mysteries even at second hand bookstores.
- 3 In “Ariadne’s Thread: Repetition and the Narrative Line,” J. Hillis Miller provides an excellent list of “some of the images of the line as they are associated with narrative form or with the ordinary terminology of storytelling: narrative line, life line, by-line, main line, drop me a line, break up their lines to weep, linotype, what’s my line?, genealogical line, genetic strain, affiliation, defile, thread of the story, *ficelle*, lineaments, crossroads, impasse, denouement, cornered, loose thread, marginal, trope, chiasmus, hyperbole, crisis, double bind, tie that binds, circulation, recoup, reproduction, engraving, beyond the pale, trespass, crossing the bar, missing link, marriage tie, couple, coupling, copulation, plot, double plot, subplot, spin a yarn, get an angle on, the end of the line” (1976, p. 69).
- 4 Even in contemporary detective fiction that employ active women detectives, the decision that the woman has to make between her career as a detective and her role as a potential homemaker is often commented on. These detectives (such as Sara Paretsky’s V. I. Warshawski, Sue Grafton’s Kinsey Millhone, Marcia Muller’s Sharon McCone, and Val McDermid’s Kate Brannigan, and so on) are often unmarried and young, and frequently at a loss as to how to balance their love lives and professional careers. Kathleen Gregory Klein, in *The Woman Detective: Gender & Genre* argues that, “To succeed commercially, authors decided that their character was either not a proper detective or not a proper woman. Occasionally, they drew both conclusions” (1995, p.4). This is what I suggest when I claim that spinster detectives are fairly at liberty to become investigators in these novels because they were not really seen as women by society, i.e, they did not ‘function’ as potential or real wives and mothers and were regarded as dysfunctional women.
- 5 In novels such as *Death at Deep End*, for example, she chooses to be actively involved, and gets a position as a governess in order to investigate more closely. This is, however, a very rare example of an investigation during which she physically investigates the relevant locations of a crime.
- 6 Miss Silver does not even go out of her room in some, such as *The Fingerprint* or *The Girl in the Cellar*, in which various witnesses call or come and visit her study, and give their statements there.
- 7 Karen Foss and Sonja Foss’s edited book *Women Speak: The Eloquence of Women’s Lives* further discusses work such as baking, costume design, planning children’s parties, making cards, jewelry design, needlework, letter and journal writing and so on, and how these works can be seen as alternative means of communication among women.
- 8 My aim is not to suggest that Miss Marple is a weaker character than Miss Silver, but it is clear that their circumstances are very different. As suggested in the quote, Miss Marple is very often juxtaposed against an official detective on the case, and chooses to either assist them or conduct an alternative investigation. She nonetheless is always victorious yet humble in reception. In contrast, Miss Silver is sometimes suggested to victims by actual police detectives who are baffled either by a lack of evidence or motive. And, although humble to a certain extent, she is never demure or bashful in the same way as Miss Marple, who can be seen to exclaim, “I only just helped a little, here and there” at the end of an investigation (*A Murder is Announced* 1950, p.343). As Dale Stoyer further argues, “Maud’s definitely a professional. And none of that ‘Oh, I’m just a woolly-headed female’ schtick of Miss Marple” (par. 2).

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