

An Analysis of the Use of Suspense in the Plot Development of Agatha Christie's *Tape-measure Murder*

Aye Aye Soe*

Abstract

Detective fiction is one of the most popular narrative genres today. It includes any story that has a crime and its solution as a central feature of its plot. In detective fictions, suspense plays a very important role and it supports the development of the plot. This paper focuses on the use of suspense in the plot development of the detective short story *Tape-measure Murder* written by Agatha Christie. The research was carried out to analyse the phases of the plot and to classify the types of suspense used in the story and to investigate the impact of suspense on the plot development of the story. In conduction this research, the phases of the plot were analysed by applying Pyramid Theory proposed by Gustav Freytag (1900) and the types of suspense occurred in each phase were classified by applying the classification of suspense proposed by Nino and Tarmar (2013) and Reedsy (2018). According to the research, the use of horrific suspense is mostly found to express the fact that each occurrence of suspense affects the plot to be more horrific and shocking. It is found out that the use of suspense in the plot development provides a satisfactory impact on the readers who love detective fictions as it promotes their critical thinking and problem-solving skills together with the detectives. It is hoped that detective stories can be used as classroom materials in teaching English Literature.

Key Words: detective fiction, suspense, plot development, Agatha Christie, tape-measure

I. INTRODUCTION

Narrative fictions usually comprise with theme, setting, plot, character and point of view. In detective stories, the plot is the arrangement of the ideas or events that make up a story and determine the reader's experience. Among the significance of plot devices, suspense is a crucial one in detective fictions. This paper studies the use of suspense which coincides with the plot development of the story *Tape- Measure Murder* written by Agatha Christie. The story is taken from the collection of Miss Marple Final Cases (1979) which deals with the theme of jealousy. It discusses the development of the plot and what types of suspense were used to support the plot development in the story. The research was carried out by applying Freytag's Pyramid Theory (1990) in examining the plot development and the theories of Nino and Tarmar (2013) and Reedsy (2018) in classifying the types of suspense.

1.1. Aim and Objectives

This research aims to study the use of suspense in the plot development in Agatha Christie's '*Tape-Measure Murder*'. This study is carried out with the following objectives: to analyse the phases of the plot which help develop the story, to classify the types of suspense used in the story, and to find out the impact of suspense used for the plot development.

1.2. Research questions

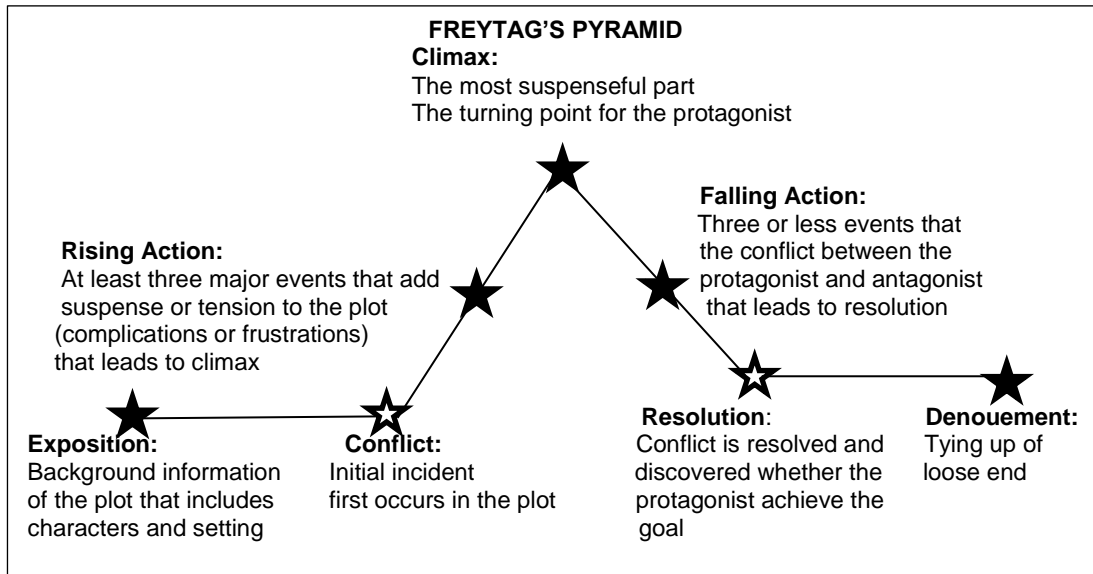
1. How many types of suspense are found in the story?
2. What is the most used type of suspense and what is the least used one?
3. What is the impact of suspense on the plot development?

* Lecturer, Department of English, Yangon University of Foreign Languages

II. CASE STUDY

2.1. Literature Review

The German Critic Gustav Freytag proposed a method of analyzing plots, now known as Freytag's Pyramid which can be conveyed to analyse the structure of the plot in a short story. (Ansen Dibell, 1999) Freytag's Pyramid divides a plot into five phases: exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement.



Exposition introduces the characters especially the protagonist, and how they relate to one another, their goals and motivation as well as their moral character. During exposition, the protagonist learns their main goal and what is at stake. **Rising action** starts with a conflict, for e.g., the death of a character. This phase is the turning point of the plot that begins the conflict. It involves the buildup of events that add suspense to the plot, complication and frustration that leads to climax which is essential to a story.

Climax is the turning point or the most suspenseful part of the story. The protagonist makes the single big decision that not only occupies the middle of the story but also defines the outcome of it. At this phase, the protagonist clears away the preliminary barriers and engages with the adversary. **Falling action** phase, according to Freytag, consists of events that lead to the ending. Characters' actions resolve the problem. The protagonist has never been further away from accomplishing the goal. In the phase of **denouement**, the protagonist and antagonist have solved their problems and either of them wins the conflict which ends officially or legally. Some stories show what happens to the characters or what happens to them in the future.

Suspense is created in a story to heighten tension during a plot, and it can occur through almost any phase of the plot in the story. There are five types of suspense in detective fiction: long-term (narrative) suspense, short-term suspense, mysterious suspense, horrific suspense, and romantic / comedic Suspense. (Nino and Tarmar, 2013; Reedsy, 2018) **Long-term (narrative) suspense**, also described as "narrative," refers to tension that builds throughout the *entire* story. In narrative suspense, the writer poses a problem, or mystery at the beginning, divulges more about it as the plot progresses, and wraps it up near climax or ending. The writer wants to continuously hint at its resolution, giving a constant pressure. With that pressure, with character development and plot progression, long-term suspense can be found. **Short-term Suspense** is just a brief scene of suspense that provokes a powerful reaction from the reader. This may tie in to the story's long-term tension, or alternately can serve as a distraction or

subplot. One of the best applications of short-term suspense is to create cliffhangers –scene or chapter endings that leave the reader desperately in suspense. Cliffhangers cut off the story at critical moments when the readers want to know what happens next. **Mysterious Suspense** is often used in thrillers and mystery stories. Though all types of suspense involve mystery in one way or another, mysterious suspense differs in that something is *deliberately* being concealed from the readers. They know it keeps them on their toes. The writer needs to add something unique to prevent the story becoming predictable –an excellent plot twist to resolve the mystery. **Horrific Suspense** is when the readers know something awful is going to happen, but naturally it remains unclear. It is most common in horror and sometimes thriller stories. Agatha Christie often intertwines mysterious and horrific suspense, making the readers question both “whodunit?” (mystery) and then “when will they do it again?” (horrific).

Romantic / Comedic Suspense may also occur when the readers don’t know what’s going to happen, though this tension is typically lighter than other forms of suspense. Romantic suspense may occur in lighthearted or more dramatic fiction whereas comedic suspense, almost exclusively occurs in farce.

2.2. Brief biography of Agatha Christie

Dame Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie (15 September 1890 – 12 January 1976) was an English well-known writer of crime and romantic novels of the 20th century. She was born on September 15, 1890 in Torquay, Devon, England and died on January 12, 1976, Winterbrook, United Kingdom and was buried at the Church of St Mary, Cholsey, Oxfordshire, England. She is best remembered for her sixty-six detective novels and fourteen short story collections, particularly those revolving around fictional detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. She is considered to be the best-selling writer of all time. Her writing was quite clear and it is easy to get absorbed in the story’s flow.

2.3. Characters in the story *Tape-Measure Murder*

The characters in the story are Miss Politt, the dressmaker; Miss Hartnell, the neighbour; Miss Marple, the Detective; Colonel Melchett, the Chief Constable; Mrs Spenlow, the deceased; Slack, the Inspector; Mr Spenlow, the husband of Mrs. Spenlow; Gladys Bent, Mrs Spenlow’s maid; Palk, the Constable; Gladys Bent, Mrs Spenlow’s maid; and Ted Gerard, the young man.

2.4. A short summary of *Tape-measure Murder* by Agatha Christie

Miss Politt, the dressmaker of St Mary Mead, went to Mrs Spenlow with the new green winter dress ready for fitting. She knocked the door of Laburnum Cottage three times, but saw no sign of Mrs Spenlow. When she saw Miss Hartnell, the neighbour, she told her that she had made an appointment. Miss Hartnell took Miss Politt to the house. They looked inside the house and found Mrs Spenlow lying dead on the hearthrug in a small sitting room. Miss Hartnell told Constable Palk that she suspected Mr Spenlow for the murder and so did most people of St. Mary Mead. Miss Politt had an alibi which could make her look innocent. She and Mrs Spenlow used to work together in the same house and involved in a robbery years ago. She was jealous of Mrs Spenlow whose florist business was prosperous. So, she decided to kill Mrs Spenlow. Finally, Miss Marple, solved the mystery and proved that Miss Politt had strangled Mrs Spenlow with a tape-measure.

2.5. Methodology

This study mainly focused on the suspense used to support the plot development of the story “*Tape-Measure Murder*” written by Agatha Christie. In doing this study, the story was taken from the collection of *Miss Marple Final Cases* (1979). The analysis was carried out by applying Pyramid theory proposed by Gustav Freytag (1900) and the classification of suspense by Nino and Tamar (2013) and Reedsy (2018). The phases of the plot were analysed and the types of suspense occurred in each phase were classified. The analysis was shown in the tables with the extracts from the story and their interpretations. After the analysis, the frequencies of the use of suspense were calculated. The percentages were shown in the table with the frequencies.

2.6. Analysis

In this analysis, the classification of the types of suspense was shown in the phases of the plot – exposition, rising action, climax, falling action and denouement in the following tables.

Table 1. Analysis of exposition and types of suspense

No.	Phase of the plot	Extracts from the story	Types of suspense	Interpretation
1.	Exposition: The story starts with a murder. Starting a story with an event like this is a great way to get the reader interested as they wanted to find out who the murderer is.	‘It’s rather awkward, you see, I was to fit on Mrs Spenlow’s new dress this afternoon. Three-thirty.’ ‘Why doesn’t Gladys answer the door? it’s Thursday – Gladys’s day out.’ There was no response. Miss Hartnell, it is true, saw no sign of life. Mrs Spenlow lying on the hearthrug – dead. (Chapter-I)	Long-term Long-term Short-term Horrific	Miss Politt went to see Mrs Spenlow for fitting a new dress but she saw no one. She The 3.30 was the time of an appointment. Miss Hartnell confirmed that Mrs Spenlow was in the house alone. No one replied to Miss Hartnell, though she called out. She knocked the door, and saw no one but Mr Spenlow lying dead in a small living room.

Table 2. Analysis of rising action and types of suspense

No.	Phase of plot	Extracts from the story	Types of suspense	Interpretation
2.	<p>Rising Action:</p> <p>The witness talked about the persons who were to be suspected. The case became complicated. Conflict occurs in this phase.</p> <p>This phase keeps up the readers with deeper interest as Miss Marple's explanation of the way the murderer did, false phone call and another person under suspicion.</p> <p>This event shows the main suspect of the story.</p> <p>This introduction of the protagonist gives the story a character and to be willing to go on reading the plot line. Miss Marple talked about the clue.</p> <p>The writer creates the story lighter and less tense to show the reader how Miss Marple is involved in the crime.</p>	<p>'I said to her. "You stay here and I'll go for Constable Palk." but I paid no attention at all.'</p> <p>'Frankly, I suspected something at once! He was <i>far</i> too calm. He didn't seem surprised in the least. it isn't natural for a man to hear that his wife is dead and display no emotion whatever.' (Chapter-I)</p> <p>So suspicious did they consider Mr Spenlow's detachment, money went to her husband under a will made soon after their marriage, they were more suspicious than ever.</p> <p>Miss Marple, was interviewed very early – within half an hour of the discovery of the crime.</p> <p>'Lying on the floor in the sitting-room, strangled possibly – by a very narrow belt. But whatever it was, it was taken away.'</p> <p>'You did not ring up Mr Spenlow at two-thirty?' (Chapter-I)</p> <p>'Pretended to get a phone call he lied, or that call was put through from a public telephone booth.</p> <p>Don't think she was mixed up in it, do you, sir? (Chapter-II)</p> <p>Ted Gerard. A good-looking young man and the slippers and scarfs that were made for him!</p> <p>'A kimono. Not a dress.' (Chapter-III)</p>	<p>Mysterious</p> <p>Mysterious</p> <p>Mysterious</p> <p>Comedic</p> <p>Mysterious</p> <p>Mysterious</p> <p>Mysterious</p> <p>Mysterious</p> <p>Mysterious</p>	<p>Miss Hartnell explained the police that she told Miss Politt to stay at Mrs Spenlow's house while she was reporting but she was unwilling to be left there. The writer hints the clue for the suspect of the murder case and it turns out to be a mystery. Again, Miss Hartnell told the police that she suspected Mr Spenlow for the crime as he showed no surprise nor no emotion. Another suspect is shown for the murder case. The police agreed with Miss Hartnell for Mr Spenlow's detachment as he showed no sign of emotion. Mrs Spenlow's money had to go to her husband according to the will. He was under suspicion. Miss Marple, an elderly spinster lived next door to the Spenlows. The police came to interview her within half an hour of the crime. The deceased was lying on the floor in the sitting room, being strangled by a narrow belt but the thing was taken away. But the police couldn't imagine what the thing was. Palk asked Miss Marple if she called Mr Spenlow. The police thought that Mr Spenlow pretended to get a phone call from Miss Marple. The police talked about the robbery that she seemed to be involved. They mentioned Ted Gerard who visited Mrs Spenlow very often. Miss Marple talked about the peculiarity of the kimono that the deceased was wearing at the time of being murdered.</p>

Table 3. Analysis of climax and types of suspense

No.	Phase of plot	Extracts from the story	Types of suspense	Types of suspense
3.	<p>Climax:</p> <p>This phase expresses how Miss Marple made a motive. She took a dress and hurried to the post office to see Miss Politt there. This occurs towards the end of the story, so the reader can speculate that this event is important for the murder. She went straight to the police after visiting Miss Politt as the case is about to be solved.</p>	<p>‘It – it conveyed the impression that he was of the opinion that I had – killed my dear wife’</p> <p>Miss Marple went up to her room, hastily rolled up a dress in a piece of brown paper, and, leaving the house, walked briskly up to the post office. Miss Politt, the dressmaker, lived in the rooms over the post office.</p> <p>Not till the postmistress returned to her post did Miss Marple go upstairs and explain to Miss Politt that she wanted her old grey crepe altered and made more fashionable if that were possible.</p> <p>(Chapter-IV)</p> <p>The chief constable was rather astonished when Miss Marple’s name was brought to him.</p> <p>(Chapter-V)</p>	<p>Horrific</p> <p>Horrific</p> <p>Horrific</p> <p>Short-term</p>	<p>Mr Spenlow told Miss Marple that he was suspected to be the murderer by the people of St. Mary Mead.</p> <p>Miss Marple went to the post office. Miss Politt lived in the flat over the post office. Her motives were evidently shown in that she went to the dressmaker whom she suspected to be the murderer.</p> <p>Miss Marple met Miss Politt in her flat and asked her to alter her crepe. It is obvious that she approached the dressmaker not to deal that matter, but with the other intention. The readers can imagine something horrific had happen.</p> <p>The readers feel a lighter tension when Miss Marple went straight to the Chief Constable. It is clear that something important is going to happen concerning with the murder.</p>

Table 4. Analysis of falling action and types of suspense

No.	Phase of plot	Extracts from the story	Types of suspense	Interpretation
4	<p>Falling action:</p> <p>During this phase the detail of the crime is explained.</p>	<p>Matter of fact he did pick the pin up just by Mrs Spenlow’s body.</p> <p>To a man’s eye, perhaps, it looked like an ordinary pin, but it wasn’t. It was a special pin, a very thin pin, the kind you buy by the box, the kind used mostly by dressmakers.’</p>	<p>Horrific</p> <p>Horrific</p>	<p>Miss Marple explained that Palk picked up the pin just by the dead body. It makes the reader horrified on noticing this clue.</p> <p>The pin Constable Palk picked up is not an ordinary pin but a special one used by dressmakers. Then the Chief Constable realized what Miss Marple wanted to say.</p>

No.	Phase of plot	Extracts from the story	Types of suspense	Interpretation
4	<p>Falling action (continued):</p> <p>In this phase, Miss Marple revealed every detail about the murder.</p> <p>She mentioned lifeless clue in this stage.</p> <p>An unexpected past of the two women is also mentioned.</p> <p>This phase enforces the resolution of the conclusion.</p>	<p>She was in her kimono because she was going to try on her new dress, and she went into the front room, and Miss Politt just said something about measurements and put the tape measure round her neck – and then all she'd have to do was to cross it and pull – quite easy.</p> <p>But the pin shows she'd <i>already been in the house.</i>'</p> <p>'The robbery. Long ago. Very valuable emeralds, so I've heard. The lady's maid and the tweeny.</p> <p>All she saw was that she might go to prison for a robbery she had committed years ago. So she made up her mind to put a stop to it all.</p> <p>I don't believe she'd have turned a hair if that nice, stupid Mr Spenlow had been hanged.' (Chapter-V)</p>	<p>Horrific</p> <p>Horrific</p> <p>Horrific</p> <p>Horrific</p> <p>Horrific</p>	<p>On the day of the crime, Mrs Spenlow was wearing a kimono as she was going to try on a new dress. She might go into the front room for the fitting. Miss Politt might have done something about the measurement and put the tape-measure around her neck, crossed it and pull. That was how Miss Marple guessed how the murder was committed.</p> <p>The pin she left proved that Miss Politt had already been in the house.</p> <p>Miss Marple talked about the robbery that the two women involved years ago.</p> <p>Miss Politt felt jealous of Mrs Spenlow who was prosperous. So, she decided to put an end of Mrs Spenlow's life.</p> <p>Miss Politt was so wicked that she intended Mr Spenlow to be hanged if she could turn out of the case.</p>

Table 5. Analysis of falling action and types of suspense

No.	phases of plot	Extracts from the story	Types of suspense	Interpretation
5.	<p>Denouement:</p> <p>In the end, Miss Marple got the evidence – Tape-measure that Miss Politt used to kill Mrs Spenlow as an evidence.</p>	<p>She's the kind of woman who will break down at once when she's taxed with the truth.</p> <p>I've got her tape measure. I – er – abstracted it yesterday when I was trying on. When she misses it and thinks the police have got it. (Chapter-V)</p>	<p>Short-term</p> <p>Short-term</p>	<p>Miss Marple reassured the Chief Constable, Melchett that Miss Politt could break down easily on hearing the truth and she took the tape-measure as an evidence on the day of her visit to Miss Politt's flat. There the short-term suspense occurs as the reader's tension is relieved.</p>

As shown in Table 1, the writer exposes the story with the murder. This unique beginning of the story with such an event is a very impressive way to get the reader's attention. In this phase, long-term suspense occurs when Miss Politt went to see Mrs Spenlow for fitting a

new dress— at 3.30, as she mentioned as an alibi for her innocence. Then, short-term suspense is found when Miss Hartnell, the neighbour passed by and she was sure that Mrs Spenlow was in the house alone as Gladys, the maid, was day off on Thursday. She called out but there was no answer. It shows something is going to happen within a short time. Horrific suspense occurs in exposition when Miss Hartnell, knocked the door of Laburnum Cottage. Instead of the reply, she saw Mrs Spenlow lying dead on the hearthrug in the small sitting room. The writer creates the plot with the mixture of suspense for the reader to think something awful had happened. This phase is also mixed with conflicts when Miss Hartnell told the police that she told Miss Politt to stay at Mrs Spenlow's house while she was reporting the incident but she was unwilling to be left there. The writer hints the clue for the suspect of the murder case and it turns out to be a mystery. Actually, Miss Hartnell suspected Mr Spenlow for the crime as he showed no surprise nor no emotion. The use of mysterious suspense is found as the plot seemed to be more complicated.

The writer draws the readers' attention to rising action (as shown in Table. 2). At this phase, comedic suspense is found when the writer introduces the protagonist, Miss Marple, an elderly spinster with a sweet face and a vinegar-tongue, living next compound to the Spenlows. The police came to interview her within half an hour of the crime. The writer creates the story lighter and less tense to show the readers how Miss Marple is involved in the crime. It makes the readers focus on a character to be willing to go on reading the plot line. Miss Marple talked about the way the murderer used the weapon and the clues that Constable Palk got. Moreover, the events establish the main suspect of the story. Mr Spenlow's detachment was revealed and he was to be suspected as Mrs Spenlow's money had to go for her husband. The police knew Mr Spenlow's detachment as he showed no sign of emotion. So, he was under suspicion. The deceased was lying on the floor in the sitting room, being strangled by a thing which seemed to be a narrow belt. But the murderer took the thing away. There, mysterious suspense is found when the police couldn't imagine what the thing was.

Moreover, Constable Palk asked Miss Marple if she called Mr Spenlow at two-thirty because the police suspected Mr Spenlow to have pretended to get a phone call from Miss Marple. She calculated that the murderer might have called Mr Spenlow from the public telephone booth at the station because there were only two public phones – at the station and the post office, so it was impossible to use the phone at the police station. Then, another mysterious suspense is seen when the police talked about the robbery that Mrs Spenlow seemed to be involved.

The police also suspected Ted Gerard who visited Mrs Spenlow very often as he was said to be seen at the station. Miss Marple mentioned the kimono that the deceased was wearing at the time of being murdered. Here, the uses of mysterious suspense are vividly found in rising action as things became more mysterious and deliberately being concealed from the readers.

The story gradually reaches climax (as shown in Table. 3) when Miss Marple took a dress and hurried to the post office to see Miss Politt once there. Miss Politt lived in a flat over the post office. Miss Marple spent a few minutes waiting in the post office and then ventured to Miss Politt and asked her to alter one of her dresses. As this occurs towards the end of the story, the readers can speculate that this event is of importance regarding the murder. Horrific suspense is found when her motives were evidently shown in that Miss Marple went to the dressmaker whom was under suspicion. The reader can imagine something horrific would happen. Then she went straight to the police after visiting Miss Politt as the case was about to be solved. Short-term suspense is found as there is a lighter tension when Miss Marple went straight to the Chief Constable to talk about the solution.

During falling action (as shown in Table. 4), the detail of the crime is explained for resolution. Miss Marple explained that the pin Constable Palk picked up by the dead body was not an ordinary pin but a special one used by dressmakers. Then the Chief Constable realized what Miss Marple wanted to say. According to Miss Marple, on the day of the crime, Mrs Spenlow was wearing a kimono for fitting a new dress. Miss Politt might have done something about some measurement and put the tape-measure around her neck, crossed it and pulled. That was how Miss Marple guessed the way the murder was committed. The pin she left proved that Miss Politt had already been in the house. Moreover, Miss Marple talked about the robbery of emerald at Abercrombie's place that the two women involved years ago. Miss Politt, who was only a village dressmaker, felt jealous of prosperous Mrs Spenlow. So, she decided to kill Mrs Spenlow. Miss Politt was so wicked that she intended Mr Spenlow to be hanged if she could turn out of the case. In this phase, the resolution of the murder become clearer.

As shown in Table.5, in denouement, Miss Marple got the evidence – the tape-measure that Miss Politt used to kill Mrs Spenlow. Miss Marple reassured the Chief Constable, Melchett that she got the tape-measure which she took on the day of her visit to Miss Politt's flat. There is short-term suspense as the reader's tension becomes lighter with the evidence which resolved the crime.

III. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

According to the analysis, the use of suspense supporting the plot is found 27 times. The percentages of the use of suspense is shown in the following table with the frequencies.

Table.6. Frequency and percentage of the use of suspense in the story

Phases of plot	Types of suspense					Total
	Long-term	Short-term	Mysterious	Horrific	Comedic	
Exposition	2	1	0	1	0	
Rising Action	0	0	9	0	1	
Climax	0	1	0	3	0	
Falling Action	0	1	0	7	0	
Resolution	0	1	0	0	0	
Frequency	2	4	9	11	1	27
Percentage	7.41%	14.81%	33.33%	40.75%	3.70%	100%

As shown in Table.6, from 27 times of the use of suspense, the most used is horrific suspense (40.75%) and the least used is comedic suspense (3.70%). The use of long-term suspense is (7.41%), short-term, (14.81%), and mysterious, (33.33%).

The use of horrific suspense is mostly found, one in exposition, three in climax and seven times in falling action as the story involved in something very awful and precise as it remains unclear until falling action. Each occurrence affects the plot to be more horrific and shocking on seeing the incident that two women, Miss Politt and Mrs Spenlow, had a close relationship while working in the same house and involved in the same robbery.

Being a detective fiction, comedic suspense is found just once when the protagonist, Miss Marple, appeared on the scene as the significant character. However, it provides a big impact on the plot, becoming less tensed and more amusing on seeing the protagonist who is

going to untie the knot. Short-term suspense occurs occasionally, one in exposition and another in climax. The writer builds up the conditions to give the plot more excitement for short periods of what will come after the next. So, the use of short-term suspense ensures the interest of the readers to continue reading the story.

As mysterious suspense is seen in rising action, so the plot becomes more complicated, making the readers compel to think deeply every matter. As the writer has done well, mystery continues to increase up until climax, or the turning point.

The use of long-term suspense, though occurs twice in exposition, have an impact on its growth of the story and resolution in the end. The resolution only comes out with the evidence of the tape-measure which is the most important lifeless clue to arrest the murderer. The police could calculate the outcome but they didn't know how to get the evidence. This long-term suspense provides a big impact in the plot development as it influences the whole story and drag the readers' attention to be eager to read till the end. Yet, when Miss Marple helped them by giving the tape-measure used by Miss Politt, short-term suspense is found as the murder is about to be solved and the plot becomes less tense. Therefore, the use of suspense for the plot development provides a satisfactory impact on the readers who love detective fictions as it promotes their skills of solving the problem together with the detectives. In conjunction with how problem is resolved and tension is relieved, suspense affects, either directly or indirectly, readers' attitude towards anticipation period, the intensity of the resolution, emotion of satisfaction, disappointment, and relief in the plot development.

IV. CONCLUSION

This paper highlights the fact that using suspense in the detective story supports the development of the plot. It is found out that detective fiction motivates the readers to focus on improving the skills on reading and understanding literary genres. Suspense, as a compositional device, consists of arranging the matter of a communication in such a way that the less important, descriptive or subordinate are amassed at the beginning and the main idea is withheld till the end of the whole story. Thus, the readers' attention is held and interest, kept up. What is significant in this story is that the murder case is exposed at the beginning and the murderer is introduced. Agatha Christie, being the most famous and all-time favourite writer, intertwines the types of suspense throughout the story to support the development of the plot. It is found out that reading detective fictions promote and refine the readers' critical thinking skills in order to make the most out of the information and experiences that surround them in their daily lives. As a result, they will be able to decode what has been read, interpret the hidden meaning, draw inferences, and apply the problem-solving strategies by reading them. It is the belief of the researcher that those who would like to study novels and short stories would appreciate detective fictions as they will entice, motivate and promote their learning skills. Therefore, it is hoped that detective fictions can be used as classroom materials in teaching English Literature to under-graduate students.

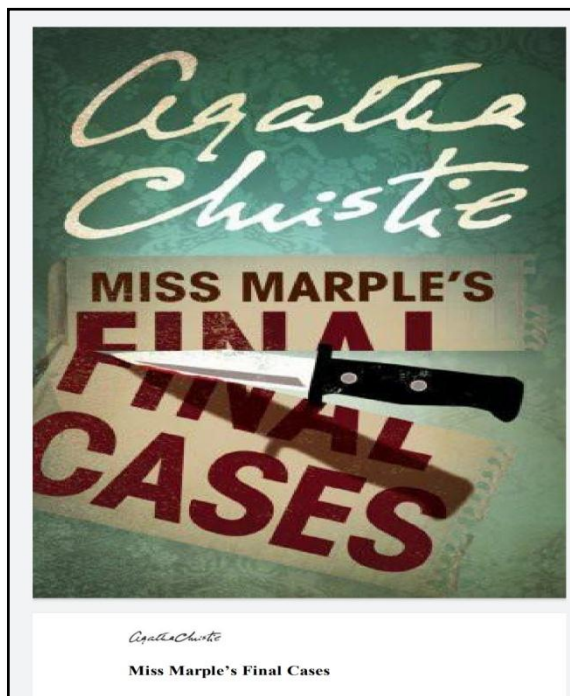
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APPENDIX



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I

Miss Politt took hold of the knocker and rapped politely on the cottage door. After a discreet interval she knocked again. The parcel under her left arm shifted a little as she did so, and she readjusted it. Inside the parcel was Mrs Spenlow's new green winter dress, ready for fitting. From Miss Politt's left hand dangled a bag of black silk, containing a tape measure, a pincushion, and a large, practical pair of scissors.

Miss Politt was tall and gaunt, with a sharp nose, pursed lips, and meagre iron-grey hair. She hesitated before using the knocker for the third time. Glancing down the street, she saw a figure rapidly approaching. Miss Hartnell, jolly, weather-beaten, fifty-five, shouted out in her usual loud bass voice, "Good afternoon, Miss Politt!"

The dressmaker answered, "Good afternoon, Miss Hartnell." Her voice was excessively thin and genteel in its accents. She had started life as a lady's maid. "Excuse me," she went on, "but do you happen to know if by any chance Mrs Spenlow isn't at home?"

"Not the least idea," said Miss Hartnell.

"It's rather awkward, you see. I was to fit on Mrs Spenlow's new dress this afternoon. Three-thirty, she said."

Miss Hartnell consulted her wrist watch. "It's a little past the half-hour now."

"Yes. I have knocked three times, but there doesn't seem to be any answer, so I was wondering if perhaps Mrs Spenlow might have gone out and forgotten. She doesn't forget appointments as a rule, and she wants the dress to wear the day after tomorrow."

Miss Hartnell entered the gate and walked up the path to join Miss Politt outside the door of Laburnum Cottage.

"Why doesn't Gladys answer the door?" she demanded. "Oh, no, of course, it's Thursday—Gladys's day out. I expect Mrs Spenlow has fallen asleep. I don't expect you've made enough noise with this thing."

Seizing the knocker, she executed a deafening *rat-a-tat-tat*, and in addition thumped upon the panels of the door. She also called out in a stentorian voice, "What ho, within there!"

There was no response.

Miss Politt murmured, "Oh, I think Mrs Spenlow must have forgotten and gone out, I'll

call round some other time." She began edging away down the path.

"Nonsense," said Miss Hartnell firmly. "She can't have gone out. I'd have met her. I'll just take a look through the windows and see if I can find any signs of life."

She laughed in her usual hearty manner, to indicate that it was a joke, and applied a perfunctory glance to the nearest window-pane—perfunctory because she knew quite well that the front room was seldom used, Mr and Mrs Spenlow preferring the small back sitting-room.

Perfunctory as it was, though, it succeeded in its object. Miss Hartnell, it is true, saw no signs of life. On the contrary, she saw, through the window, Mrs Spenlow lying on the hearthrug—dead.

"Of course," said Miss Hartnell, telling the story afterwards, "I managed to keep my head. That Politt creature wouldn't have had the least idea of what to do. "Got to keep our heads," I said to her. "You stay here, and I'll go for Constable Palk." She said something about not wanting to be left, but I paid no attention at all. One has to be firm with that sort of person. I've always found they enjoy making a fuss. So I was just going off when, at that very moment, Mr Spenlow came round the corner of the house."

Here Miss Hartnell made a significant pause. It enabled her audience to ask breathlessly, "Tell me, how did he *look*?"

Miss Hartnell would then go on, "Frankly, I suspected something at once! He was *far* too calm. He didn't seem surprised in the least. And you may say what you like, it isn't natural for a man to hear that his wife is dead and display no emotion whatever."

Everybody agreed with this statement.

The police agreed with it, too. So suspicious did they consider Mr Spenlow's detachment, that they lost no time in ascertaining how that gentleman was situated as a result of his wife's death. When they discovered that Mrs Spenlow had been the monied partner, and that her money went to her husband under a will made soon after their marriage, they were more suspicious than ever.

Miss Marple, that sweet-faced—and, some said, vinegar-tongued—elderly spinster who lived in the house next to the rectory, was interviewed very early—within half an hour of the discovery of the crime. She was approached by Police Constable Palk, importantly thumping a notebook. "If you don't mind, ma'am, I've a few questions to ask you."

Miss Marple said, "In connection with the murder of Mrs Spenlow?"

Palk was startled. "May I ask, madam, how you got to know of it?"

"The fish," said Miss Marple.

The reply was perfectly intelligible to Constable Palk. He assumed correctly that the fishmonger's boy had brought it, together with Miss Marple's evening meal.

Miss Marple continued gently, "Lying on the floor in the sitting-room, strangled—possibly by a very narrow belt. But whatever it was, it was taken away."

Palk's face was wrathful. "How that young Fred gets to know everything—"

Miss Marple cut him short adroitly. She said, 'There's a pin in your tunic.'

Constable Palk looked down, startled. He said, 'They do say, "See a pin and pick it up all the day you'll have good luck."'

'I hope that will come true. Now what is it you want me to tell you?'

Constable Palk cleared his throat, looked important, and consulted his notebook. 'Statement was made to me by Mr Arthur Spenlow, husband of the deceased. Mr Spenlow says that at two-thirty, as far as he can say, he was rung up by Miss Marple, and asked if he would come over at a quarter past three as she was anxious to consult him about something. Now, ma'am, is that true?'

'Certainly not,' said Miss Marple.

'You did not ring up Mr Spenlow at two-thirty?'

'Neither at two-thirty nor any other time.'

'Ah,' said Constable Palk, and sucked his moustache with a good deal of satisfaction.

'What else did Mr Spenlow say?'

'Mr Spenlow's statement was that he came over here as requested, leaving his own house at ten minutes past three, that on arrival here he was informed by the maid-servant that Miss Marple was "not at home".'

'That part of it is true,' said Miss Marple. 'He did come here, but I was at a meeting at the Women's Institute.'

'Ah,' said Constable Palk again.

Miss Marple exclaimed, 'Do tell me, Constable, do you suspect Mr Spenlow?'

'It's not for me to say at this stage, but it looks to me as though somebody, naming no names, has been trying to be artful.'

Miss Marple said thoughtfully, 'Mr Spenlow?'

She liked Mr Spenlow. He was a small, spare man, stiff and conventional in speech, the acme of respectability. It seemed odd that he should have come to live in the country, he had so clearly lived in towns all his life. To Miss Marple he confided the reason. He said, 'I have always intended, ever since I was a small boy, to live in the country some day and have a garden of my own. I have always been very much attached to flowers. My wife, you know, kept a flower shop. That's where I saw her first.'

A dry statement, but it opened up a vista of romance. A younger, prettier Mrs Spenlow, seen against a background of flowers.

Mr Spenlow, however, really knew nothing about flowers. He had no idea of seeds, of cuttings, of bedding out, of annuals or perennials. He had only a vision—a vision of a small cottage garden thickly planted with sweet-smelling, brightly coloured blossoms. He had asked, almost pathetically, for instruction, and had noted down Miss Marple's replies to questions in a little book.

He was a man of quiet method. It was, perhaps, because of this trait, that the police

were interested in him when his wife was found murdered. With patience and perseverance they learned a good deal about the late Mrs Spenlow—and soon all St Mary Mead knew it too.

The late Mrs Spenlow had begun life as a between-maid in a large house. She had left that position to marry the second gardener, and with him had started a flower shop in London. The shop had prospered. Not so the gardener, who before long had sickened and died.

His widow carried on the shop and enlarged it in an ambitious way. She had continued to prosper. Then she had sold the business at a handsome price and embarked upon matrimony for the second time—with Mr Spenlow, a middle-aged jeweller who had inherited a small and struggling business. Not long afterwards, they had sold the business and came down to St Mary Mead.

Mrs Spenlow was a well-to-do woman. The profits from her florist's establishment she had invested—'under spirit guidance', as she explained to all and sundry. The spirits had advised her with unexpected acumen.

All her investments had prospered, some in quite a sensational fashion. Instead, however, of this increasing her belief in spiritualism, Mrs Spenlow basely deserted mediums and sittings, and made a brief but wholehearted plunge into an obscure religion with Indian affinities which was based on various forms of deep breathing. When, however, she arrived at St Mary Mead, she had relapsed into a period of orthodox Church-of-England beliefs. She was a good deal at the vicarage, and attended church services with assiduity. She patronized the village shops, took an interest in the local happenings, and played village bridge.

A humdrum, everyday life. And—suddenly—murder.

II

Colonel Melchett, the chief constable, had summoned Inspector Slack.

Slack was a positive type of man. When he had made up his mind, he was sure. He was quite sure now. 'Husband did it, sir,' he said.

'You think so?'

'Quite sure of it. You've only got to look at him. Guilty as hell. Never showed a sign of grief or emotion. He came back to the house knowing she was dead.'

'Wouldn't he at least have tried to act the part of the distracted husband?'

'Not him, sir. Too pleased with himself. Some gentlemen can't act. Too stiff.'

'Any other woman in his life?' Colonel Melchett asked.

'Haven't been able to find any trace of one. Of course, he's the artful kind. He'd cover his tracks. As I see it, he was just fed up with his wife. She'd got the money, and I should say was a trying woman to live with—always taking up with some "ism" or other. He cold-

bloodedly decided to do away with her and live comfortably on his own.'

'Yes, that could be the case, I suppose.'

'Depend upon it, that was it. Made his plans careful. Pretended to get a phone call—'

Melchett interrupted him. 'No call been traced?'

'No, sir. That means either that he lied, or that the call was put through from a public telephone booth. The only two public phones in the village are at the station and the post office. Post office it certainly wasn't. Mrs Blade sees everyone who comes in. Station it might be. Train arrives at two twenty-seven and there's a bit of a bustle then. But the main thing is *he* says it was Miss Marple who called him up, and that certainly isn't true. The call didn't come from her house, and she herself was away at the Institute.'

'You're not overlooking the possibility that the husband was deliberately got out of the way—by someone who wanted to murder Mrs Spenlow?'

'You're thinking of young Ted Gerard, aren't you, sir? I've been working on him—what we're up against there is lack of motive. He doesn't stand to gain anything.'

'He's an undesirable character, though. Quite a pretty little spot of embezzlement to his credit.'

'I'm not saying he isn't a wrong 'un. Still, he did go to his boss and own up to that embezzlement. And his employers weren't wise to it.'

'An Oxford Grouper,' said Melchett.

'Yes, sir. Became a convert and went off to do the straight thing and own up to having pinched money. I'm not saying, mind you, that it mayn't have been astuteness. He may have thought he was suspected and decided to gamble on honest repentance.'

'You have a sceptical mind, Slack,' said Colonel Melchett. 'By the way, have you talked to Miss Marple at all?'

'What's *she* got to do with it, sir?'

'Oh, nothing. But she hears things, you know. Why don't you go and have a chat with her? She's a very sharp old lady.'

Slack changed the subject. 'One thing I've been meaning to ask you, sir. That domestic-service job where the deceased started her career—Sir Robert Abercrombie's place. That's where that jewel robbery was—emeralds—worth a packet. Never got them. I've been looking it up—must have happened when the Spenlow woman was there, though she'd have been quite a girl at the time. Don't think she was mixed up in it, do you, sir? Spenlow, you know, was one of those little tuppenny-ha'penny jewellers—just the chap for a fence.'

Melchett shook his head. 'Don't think there's anything in that. She didn't even know Spenlow at the time. I remember the case. Opinion in police circles was that a son of the house was mixed up in it—Jim Abercrombie—awful young waster. Had a pile of debts, and just after the robbery they were all paid off—some rich woman, so they said, but I don't know—Old Abercrombie hedged a bit about the case—tried to call the police off.'

'It was just an idea, sir,' said Slack.

III

Miss Marple received Inspector Slack with gratification, especially when she heard that he had been sent by Colonel Melchett.

'Now, really, that is very kind of Colonel Melchett. I didn't know he remembered me.'

'He remembers you, all right. Told me that what you didn't know of what goes on in St Mary Mead isn't worth knowing.'

'Too kind of him, but really I don't know anything at all. About this murder, I mean.'

'You know what the talk about it is.'

'Oh, of course—but it wouldn't do, would it, to repeat just idle talk?'

Slack said, with an attempt at geniality, 'This isn't an official conversation, you know. It's in confidence, so to speak.'

'You mean you really want to know what people are saying? Whether there's any truth in it or not?'

'That's the idea.'

'Well, of course, there's been a great deal of talk and speculation. And there are really two distinct camps, if you understand me. To begin with, there are the people who think that the husband did it. A husband or a wife is, in a way, the natural person to suspect, don't you think so?'

'Maybe,' said the inspector cautiously.

'Such close quarters, you know. Then, so often, the money angle. I hear that it was Mrs Spenlow who had the money, and therefore Mr Spenlow does benefit by her death. In this wicked world I'm afraid the most uncharitable assumptions are often justified.'

'He comes into a tidy sum, all right.'

'Just so. It would seem quite plausible, wouldn't it, for him to strangle her, leave the house by the back, come across the fields to my house, ask for me and pretend he'd had a telephone call from me, then go back and find his wife murdered in his absence—hoping, of course, that the crime would be put down to some tramp or burglar.'

The inspector nodded. 'What with the money angle—and if they'd been on bad terms lately—'

But Miss Marple interrupted him. 'Oh, but they hadn't.'

'You know that for a fact?'

'Everyone would have known if they'd quarrelled! The maid, Gladys Brent—she's had soon spread it round the village.'

The inspector said feebly, 'She mightn't have known—' and received a pitying smile in

reply.

Miss Marple went on. 'And then there's the other school of thought. Ted Gerard. A good-looking young man. I'm afraid, you know, that good looks are inclined to influence one more than they should. Our last curate but one—quite a magical effect! All the girls came to church—evening service as well as morning. And many older women became unusually active in parish work—and the slippers and scarfs that were made for him! Quite embarrassing for the poor young man.

'But let me see, where was I? Oh, yes, this young man, Ted Gerard. Of course, there has been talk about him. He's come down to see her so often. Though Mrs Spenlow told me herself that he was a member of what I think they call the Oxford Group. A religious movement. They are quite sincere and very earnest, I believe, and Mrs Spenlow was impressed by it all.'

Miss Marple took a breath and went on. 'And I'm sure there was no reason to believe that there was anything more in it than that, but you know what people are. Quite a lot of people are convinced that Mrs Spenlow was infatuated with the young man, and that she'd lent him quite a lot of money. And it's perfectly true that he was actually seen at the station that day. In the train—the two twenty-seven down train. But of course it would be quite easy, wouldn't it, to slip out of the other side of the train and go through the cutting and over the fence and round by the hedge and never come out of the station entrance at all. So that he need not have been seen going to the cottage. And, of course, people do think that what Mrs Spenlow was wearing was rather peculiar.'

'Peculiar?'

'A kimono. Not a dress.' Miss Marple blushed. 'That sort of thing, you know, is, perhaps, rather suggestive to some people.'

'You think it was suggestive?'

'Oh, no, I don't think so, I think it was perfectly natural.'

'You think it was natural?'

'Under the circumstances, yes.' Miss Marple's glance was cool and reflective.

Inspector Slack said, 'It might give us another motive for the husband. Jealousy.'

'Oh, no, Mr Spenlow would never be jealous. He's not the sort of man who notices things. If his wife had gone away and left a note on the pin cushion, it would be the first he'd know of anything of that kind.'

Inspector Slack was puzzled by the intent way she was looking at him. He had an idea that all her conversation was intended to hint at something he didn't understand. She said now, with some emphasis, 'Didn't you find any clues, Inspector—on the spot?'

'People don't leave fingerprints and cigarette ash nowadays, Miss Marple.'

'But this, I think,' she suggested, 'was an old-fashioned crime—'

Slack said sharply, 'Now what do you mean by that?'

Miss Marple remarked slowly, 'I think, you know, that Constable Palk could help you

He was the first person on the—on the "scene of the crime", as they say.'

IV

Mr Spenlow was sitting in a deck chair. He looked bewildered. He said, in his thin, precise voice, 'I may, of course, be imagining what occurred. My hearing is not as good as it was. But I distinctly think I heard a small boy call after me, "Yah, who's a Crippen?" It—it conveyed the impression to me that he was of the opinion that I had—had killed my dear wife.'

Miss Marple, gently snipping off a dead rose head, said, 'That was the impression he meant to convey, no doubt.'

'But what could possibly have put such an idea into a child's head?'

Miss Marple coughed. 'Listening, no doubt, to the opinions of his elders.'

'You—you really mean that other people think that, also?'

'Quite half the people in St Mary Mead.'

'But—my dear lady—what can possibly have given rise to such an idea? I was sincerely attached to my wife. She did not, alas, take to living in the country as much as I had hoped she would do, but perfect agreement on every subject is an impossible idea. I assure you I feel her loss very keenly.'

'Probably. But if you will excuse my saying so, you don't sound as though you do.'

Mr Spenlow drew his meagre frame up to its full height. 'My dear lady, many years ago I read of a certain Chinese philosopher who, when his dearly loved wife was taken from him, continued calmly to beat a gong in the street—a customary Chinese pastime, I presume—exactly as usual. The people of the city were much impressed by his fortitude.'

'But,' said Miss Marple, 'the people of St Mary Mead react rather differently. Chinese philosophy does not appeal to them.'

'But you understand?'

Miss Marple nodded. 'My Uncle Henry,' she explained, 'was a man of unusual self-control. His motto was "Never display emotion". He, too, was very fond of flowers.'

'I was thinking,' said Mr Spenlow with something like eagerness, 'that I might, perhaps, have a pergola on the west side of the cottage. Pink roses and, perhaps, wisteria. And there is a white starry flower, whose name for the moment escapes me—'

In the tone in which she spoke to her grandnephew, aged three, Miss Marple said, 'I have a very nice catalogue here, with pictures. Perhaps you would like to look through it—I have to go up to the village.'

Leaving Mr Spenlow sitting happily in the garden with his catalogue, Miss Marple went up to her room, hastily rolled up a dress in a piece of brown paper, and, leaving the house, walked briskly up to the post office. Miss Politt, the dressmaker, lived in the rooms

over the post office.

But Miss Marple did not at once go through the door and up the stairs. It was just thirty, and, a minute late, the Much Benham bus drew up outside the post office door. It was one of the events of the day in St Mary Mead. The postmistress hurried out with parcels connected with the shop side of her business, for the post office also dealt sweets, cheap books, and children's toys.

For some four minutes Miss Marple was alone in the post office.

Not till the postmistress returned to her post did Miss Marple go upstairs and explain to Miss Politt that she wanted her old grey crepe altered and made more fashionable if it were possible. Miss Politt promised to see what she could do.

V

The chief constable was rather astonished when Miss Marple's name was brought to him. She came in with many apologies. 'So sorry—so very sorry to disturb you. You are so busy, I know, but then you have always been so very kind, Colonel Melchett, and I felt I would rather come to you instead of Inspector Slack. For one thing, you know, I should have liked Constable Palk to get into any trouble. Strictly speaking, I suppose he shouldn't have touched anything at all.'

Colonel Melchett was slightly bewildered. He said, 'Palk? That's the St Mary Mead constable, isn't it? What has he been doing?'

'He picked up a pin, you know. It was in his tunic. And it occurred to me at the time that it was quite probable he had actually picked it up in Mrs Spenlow's house.'

'Quite, quite. But after all, you know, what's a pin? Matter of fact he did pick the one up just by Mrs Spenlow's body. Came and told Slack about it yesterday—you put him up to that, I gather? Oughtn't to have touched anything, of course, but as I said, what's a pin? It was only a common pin. Sort of thing any woman might use.'

'Oh, no, Colonel Melchett, that's where you're wrong. To a man's eye, perhaps, looked like an ordinary pin, but it wasn't. It was a special pin, a very thin pin, the kind you buy by the box, the kind used mostly by dressmakers.'

Melchett stared at her, a faint light of comprehension breaking in on him. Miss Marple nodded her head several times, eagerly.

'Yes, of course. It seems to me so obvious. She was in her kimono because she was going to try on her new dress, and she went into the front room, and Miss Politt just started something about measurements and put the tape measure round her neck—and then all she had to do was to cross it and pull—quite easy, so I've heard. And then, of course, she'd go outside and pull the door to and stand there knocking as though she'd just arrived. But the pin shows she'd already been in the house.'

'And it was Miss Politt who telephoned to Spenlow?'

'Yes. From the post office at two-thirty—just when the bus comes and the post office would be empty.'

Colonel Melchett said, 'But my dear Miss Marple, why? In heaven's name, why? You can't have a murder without a motive.'

'Well, I think, you know, Colonel Melchett, from all I've heard, that the crime dates from a long time back. It reminds me, you know, of my two cousins, Antony and Gordon. Whatever Antony did always went right for him, and with poor Gordon it was just the other way about. Race horses went lame, and stocks went down, and property depreciated. As I see it, the two women were in it together.'

'In what?'

'The robbery. Long ago. Very valuable emeralds, so I've heard. The lady's maid and the twenny. Because one thing hasn't been explained—how, when the twenny married the gardener, did they have enough money to set up a flower shop?'

'The answer is, it was her share of the—swag. I think is the right expression. Everything she did turned out well. Money made money. But the other one, the lady's maid, must have been unlucky. She came down to being just a village dressmaker. Then they met again. Quite all right at first, I expect, until Mr Ted Gerard came on the scene.'

'Mrs Spenlow, you see, was already suffering from conscience, and was inclined to be emotionally religious. This young man no doubt urged her to "face up" and to "come clean" and I dare say she was strung up to do it. But Miss Politt didn't see it that way. All she saw was that she might go to prison for a robbery she had committed years ago. So she made up her mind to put a stop to it all. I'm afraid, you know, that she was always rather a wicked woman. I don't believe she'd have turned a hair if that nice, stupid Mr Spenlow had been hanged.'

Colonel Melchett said slowly, 'We can—er—verify your theory—up to a point. The identity of the Politt woman with the lady's maid at the Abercrombies', but—'

Miss Marple reassured him. 'It will be all quite easy. She's the kind of woman who will break down at once when she's taxed with the truth. And then, you see, I've got her tape measure. I—er—abstracted it yesterday when I was trying on. When she misses it and thinks the police have got it—well, she's quite an ignorant woman and she'll think it will prove the case against her in some way.'

She smiled at him encouragingly. 'You'll have no trouble, I can assure you.' It was the tone in which his favourite aunt had once assured him that he could not fail to pass his entrance examination into Sandhurst.

And he had passed.