

**AGATHA CHRISTIE: WRITER, PHARMACIST, AND WARTIME NURSE**

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**Abstract.** The article explores a lesser-known aspect of Agatha Christie's biography—her work as a nurse and pharmacist during the First World War. It analyzes the influence of her pharmacological knowledge on the formation of her literary style and the plots of her detective novels. The significance of her medical experience for creating realistic depictions of poisonings and medicines is emphasized.

**Keywords:** Agatha Christie, pharmacist, nurse, First World War, poisons, detective novel, pharmacology, literature.

**Agatha Mary Clarissa Christie (1890–1976)** was an outstanding English writer, known worldwide as the “Queen of Crime.” Her works have been translated into dozens of languages, and their circulation is second only to the Bible and the works of Shakespeare. However, not everyone knows that the development of her literary mastery was influenced by her activities connected with medicine and pharmacy during the First World War.

With the outbreak of war, Agatha Christie volunteered for the British Red Cross and, starting in 1914, worked as a nurse at a hospital in Torquay. She cared for wounded soldiers, assisted doctors, and gained practical skills in nursing.

From 1917, Christie began working in the hospital's dispensary. There she studied pharmacology, methods of preparing and dosing medicines, and the effects of chemical substances on the human body. She paid particular attention to poisons—cyanide, strychnine, morphine, arsenic, and others. During her service, she obtained a certificate as an assistant dispenser, which gave her the official right to handle medicinal substances.

The knowledge she acquired became a source of inspiration for the writer. Poisons and chemical substances took an important place in her works. Thanks to her pharmaceutical precision, her detective novels stood out for their realism and credibility. Christie is often referred to as the “most poisonous author” in literary history.

According to literary critics and pharmacologists, Christie used more than 80 different poisons in her works.

For example, in her first published novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), strychnine poisoning plays a key role in the solution. Later, poisons became crucial elements in novels such as *Death on the Nile*, *Five Little Pigs*, *The Mystery of the Blue Train*, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, and many others.

Poisoning in one form or another occurs in about 60 of Christie's novels and short stories.

Roughly half of all her fictional murders (about 41–50%) are committed using poisons—one of the highest rates among detective authors.

The most frequently used substances include strychnine, cyanide, morphine, arsenic, thallium, and digitalis.

One of her most famous cases is the novel *Ordeal by Innocence* (1953), where digitalis poisoning is described so precisely that doctors later cited it as an example in toxicology lectures.

A unique case occurred with *The Pale Horse* (1961), in which thallium poisoning was so accurately depicted that a doctor who read the book recognized the symptoms in a real patient and saved their life.

In her novels, Christie used a wide range of poisons, for example:

- **Mineral and simple chemical compounds:** arsenic, cyanide, phosphorus, thallium.
- **Plant alkaloids:** strychnine, atropine (from belladonna), coniine (hemlock), aconitine (from monkshood), taxine (from yew).
- **Pharmacological preparations:** morphine, heroin, nicotine, barbiturates (veronal), digitalis, eserine (physostigmine), hyoscyne (scopolamine).
- **Exotic and rare substances:** curare, ricin, zootoxins (snake venom), bacteria (anthrax in *Cards on the Table*).

Thanks to her experience as a pharmacist and nurse during the First World War, Christie knew exactly how substances acted, in what doses they became lethal, and how symptoms manifested.

She paid attention to the accuracy of medical details: characteristic signs of intoxication, time of action, methods of administration. Unlike many other writers, Christie demonstrated different methods of introducing poisons: orally (with food or drink), through medicines, injections, eye drops (*Crooked House*), and contact (powders, cosmetics, plants).

In medical literature, Christie is sometimes cited as an example for toxicology students: her descriptions are often more vivid and illustrative than dry clinical textbooks.

Thus, her pharmaceutical knowledge not only enriched literature but also had practical value. Her expertise allowed her to create logically constructed and scientifically grounded plots, which

distinguished her works from other detective fiction of the time.

In addition to her literary contribution, Christie's work during the war had practical importance. She helped the wounded and suffering, demonstrating humanity and resilience. Her biography is an example of how life's trials can become the foundation for creativity that leaves an indelible mark on world culture.

### **Conclusion**

Christie's experience as a nurse and pharmacist during the First World War had a decisive influence on her writing. Her knowledge of medicines and poisons helped her develop a unique style based on medical accuracy. These aspects of her biography are of interest not only to literary scholars but also to historians of pharmacy and medicine.

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