

Investigative Women:

From Marple to Mare, Amateurs to Professionals

NoraLee Cleve

Mellon Pathways Research Group

Abstract

This paper examines depictions of female investigators in detective and crime fictions, focusing on how gender differences, genre stereotypes, and misogyny affect how these women are presented to us as the audience. Textual analysis and feminist theory are used to compare how the female investigator character is positioned relative to her male colleagues, romantic interests, family, and victims. Whether clothing or aging are factors for their sexualization and how traditionally female traits such as caregiving or sensitivity are handled. The term investigator is more broadly defined to include those characters not officially within law enforcement. Media examples from both the United States and England for comparison are used, supporting that specific gendered representation is still present even in transnational content.

Introduction

In the United States, people spend a large portion of their leisure time everyday engaging with television, whether that be in the form of series, movies, or videos in general on streaming

services or through DVDs; more than fifty-five percent of their personal time is devoted to watching this media, around 2 hours and 45 minutes per day for people 15 years of age or older (Krantz-Kent). That is a significant amount of time that we're spending taking in these stories, passively absorbing ideas.

Some more trivial cultural aspects are influenced by our consumption of television, such as slang, think *Clueless* (1995) with its popularization of valley girl vernacular or the *Matrix* (1999) for coining the terms "red pill" and "blue pill" meaning someone that "accepts the truth by embracing a harsh reality" or someone that chooses to remain blissfully ignorant, though the latter terms have had their original meanings warped from their original film meanings by alt-right anti-feminist groups (Veltman, 2025) (Rauch). Fashion, as well, is another facet of our culture that changes with the popularization of various media. With the release of the hit Netflix romance series *Bridgerton* (2020-), there was a sudden increase in interest in Regency era clothing and corsets on social media, showing that even more unconventional items can be popularized by something as simple as a television series (Maguire). Even the debut of the controversial film *House of Gucci* (2021) caused a surge in searches for the Italian brand's clothing and accessories on the fashion search engine *ShopStyle* (McCall). Clearly, we identify with our media, or at the very least subconsciously take it in and allow it to influence our decisions in the real world.

With that being said, it should then come as no surprise that when more complex ideas are portrayed, they can reinforce behavior within our culture considerably. At its heart, media is not unlike a form of advertisement, even propaganda, and it is used as a means to reinforce positive and negative social ideas whether we like it or not. Human beings are impressionable, and while we may think that all of the ideas and beliefs that we hold are our own, we are an

amalgam of every interaction with others, life experience, and even the pieces of media we consume. Even in crime television, a genre that is enjoyed for its serious subject matter and usually grim tone, is still affected by issues of misogyny in its depiction of women. Female investigators in crime fiction demonstrate how women's authority, credibility, and respect are constrained by expectations of femininity and domestic roles.

Method

The word investigator is vague and may be applied to many different characters, whether they are considered formally employed as such or not. For example, we have characters like SSA Emily Prentiss from *Criminal Minds* (2005-2020), who begins and ends the series as an agent for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, eventually moving up the ranks and taking over as the unit chief for her division by the series finale. This character is easily called an investigator by the official title of her position, but others maybe not so much. On the other end, Dr. Temperance Brennan from *Bones* (2005-2017) is a forensic anthropologist for the fictional *Jeffersonian Institute* and works alongside FBI Agent Seeley Booth. Though Dr. Brennan is still considered a civilian and not an agent of the FBI, or even a detective in any formal capacity, her role in the series develops over time, from being one of the "squints" (a term used by Agent Booth to refer to the forensic experts) in the lab, to a fine and capable investigator in her own right. Under Agent Booth's guidance, she conducts interviews of suspects, collects crime scene evidence on-site, and aids in the apprehension of criminals in addition to her regular forensic duties. She is most certainly an *investigator* by the substance of her work. Simply, for our purposes, an investigator is someone who makes inquiries into the nature of a crime with the intention of solving it, regardless of the legality of their status to do so.

A qualitative approach was taken when examining the selected media content. Media will be primarily examined through the lens of feminist theory and the method employed for content evaluation will be textual analysis, which focuses on the development of characters, visual components, as well as the narrative itself. Interpersonal relationships between the female investigators and those around her, such as colleagues, friends, and romantic partners, were evaluated, as well as her interactions with the victims and their families and the criminals of each television episode, when applicable. In particular, the interactions between her and the other female characters were an important point of analysis. The frequency with which these characters have other people in their lives who support them, whether they are other women, and how solitary these investigators are, regardless of familial and social ties.

Visual components of these characters were observed, such as how they were dressed and styled by their respective authors and directors—keeping in mind the time period in which they were produced—while asking questions about the levels of potential suggestiveness or impracticality of the attire for these characters' professions or the situations they are likely to be in.

Television series like *Vera* (2011-2025) were selected for analysis due to their long airing period, which provides not only a plethora of content but also ample opportunity for observing these female characters over the course of the social and political changes both in the real world and the in-universe life events that these women go through. This paper reviews Cornwell's debut novel, *Postmortem*, and its characterization of its central female investigator, the forensic pathologist Dr. Kay Scarpetta. *Mare of Easttown* (2021) is a contemporary adaptation of a female criminal investigator that subverts some expectations in her roles as a daughter and a mother.

Though most of the pieces of media being referenced in this paper were produced by Hollywood for an American audience, that does not mean that there are not similar patterns to be noticed within content outside of the United States. There are a multitude of cultural similarities between the United States and England. As children, we are exposed to lots of English media without even consciously acknowledging it. Older childhood staples such as *Mary Poppins*, *Peter Pan*, and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* all are of English origin and have been a part of the children's media roster in some form or another for decades. More recent additions, like the *Harry Potter* novels, despite recent criticisms of the author's political views, have seen enormous global success that still continues to this day with more than 600 million copies sold and even a new television series on the way (Chawla) (Gardner). American children have grown up watching English media alongside American media, helping to break down cultural differences and hardly making it seem foreign at all by the time they have grown up. In addition to this, in this modern age, with the rise of popular streaming platforms such as Netflix, Amazon Prime, HBO's Max, the ability for the average person to engage with film and television from outside of their country of residence is made easier now more than ever. According to Pew Research, over 80 % of Americans currently use an online streaming platform of some kind, highlighting how transnational media consumption is available in nearly every U.S. household (Park and McClain).

Naturally one of the greatest commonalities between the United States and England is that the United States comes from England itself, having once been a colony of the British Empire. This not only means that we utilize a shared language, which easily facilitates the sharing of ideas, but means that together there is a shared history and, to an extent, a cultural understanding. Though centuries have passed, there still remains a deeper cultural understanding

born out of our common heritage, and there continues to be a back-and-forth exchange of ideas. The mid-twentieth century especially, with the rise of youth culture in both the United States and England, was a time when the exchange of pop-culture began to increase. American music like jazz and blues become more popular in England after the war and in return, English bands like *The Beatles*, the iconic symbol of women's liberation, the miniskirt, and of course, television (Library of Congress) (Luther Hillman).

Jane Marple – Murder at the Vicarage

Though she had appeared in a short story three years earlier, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930) is Agatha Christie's first novel featuring the investigator Jane Marple. Miss Marple is an elderly woman described as being white-haired, nosy, and unassuming. Never having been married, she is considered a spinster of the village St. Mary Mead, where the story takes place. It is interesting to note that Miss Marple is an amateur detective, which was much more common for female investigators in the past to be amateurs. While she often assists the police, she does not work for them and has no professional history of investigative work.

This story follows the murder of Colonel Protheroe, a magistrate, unpopular and known for his bully personality. Disliked by everyone, even the narrator Vicar Clement whom we experience the story through wishes him dead in the first chapter. Many people have motive for his murder, but the most notable suspects are his second wife Anne, his daughter and Anne's step-daughter, Lettice, and the visiting artist Lawrence Redding, though all have an alibi. Protheroe is discovered dead, shot by a Mauser pistol in the head, at the desk in Clement's study at the church. Initially both Anne and Redding separately confess to the murder, thinking the

other had done it in an attempt to protect them due to their love affair, but they were quickly exonerated because of Redding being away from the scene at the time of death and for Anne's having been seen with no way of concealing a pistol. Other suspects were considered, such as the mysterious Mrs. Lestrangle who had recently moved to town and the archeologist Dr. Stone who was conducting a dig on Protheroe's land. Though in the end, Miss Marple deduces the culprit, or in this case, culprits. Through her careful observation, skepticism of their alibis, and her questioning of a time discrepancy due to the vicar preferring the clock in his study to be set 15 minutes fast, Lawrence Redding and Anne are discovered to be found guilty of the murder of Colonel Protheroe. Marple devises a plan and tricks Redding into successfully incriminating himself and Anne. Redding decides and he and Anne cannot be together with the obstacle of her husband in the way, so the two of them plot to murder him so they may be together; their initial confession to the crime being a strategic red herring to defer suspicion.

At Marple's first introduction in the novel, she is referred to as "that terrible Miss Marple," and as a woman known for "knowing every single thing that happens [in the village]—and drawing the worst inferences from it," showing us right away how she is largely perceived (Christie 1930). Scholar and philosopher Simone de Beauvoir's book, *The Second Sex*, covers many insightful topics that may be utilized for the analysis in this paper. Her idea of woman's otherness in relation to man, who are the "default," and how her value comes from her ability to perform marriage and gender roles for him particularly are poignant; within this structure, an unmarried older woman, a spinster, resides in a particularly intense degree of "otherness," and has no social consequence or value (De Beauvoir 1949). Therefore Miss Marple, an older woman with no children who never married puts her outside the standard patriarchal social hierarchy, which in most cases would be a punishment for the women for not performing the roles of

traditional femininity, but Marple uses this to her advantage. Due to her degree of outsider status, she is able to maneuver with a sort of social invisibility, providing her with a powerful position for the acquisition of knowledge.

Miss Marple's investigative strengths lie in her ability to observe and collect information without drawing attention. She is routinely underestimated by police and criminals, dismissed as harmless, "gossip-y," and this is also something she is able to use to her advantage. She represents an early version of the female investigator, one that derives her investigative respect, not from a formal professional status, but from her strategic use of gender expectations. She gains much of her knowledge of the goings-on in the village simply through conversation, observation, and analysis of local talk, forms of communication that is often trivialized for shamed as being gossip. In *The Murder at the Vicarage*, this dominant negative perception of gossip is challenged by author Christie, speaking to its social value and turning it from something looked down on solely because of its association with women, to a useful tool for the sharing of information that, as Christie writes, is so often true (Maslin) (Christie 1930).

In chapter seven, Colonel Melchett, one of the people working on the case, is discussing with Clement details of the case when Clement says that he cannot provide more information about the personal relationship between Anne and Redding. To this, Melchett then says, "There's a lot of talk. Too many women in this part of the world," showing his disdain towards what is again negatively mentioned as gossip. Shaw and Vanacker discuss this saying that one of the symptoms of the First World War was a fear of the unmarried woman along with an accompanying misogyny, as well as a feeling of guilt and resentment towards over the amount of women leading apparently "useless" lives due to the lack of available men, thus creating spinsters and, as Shaw and Vanacker put it, surplus women (Shaw and Vanacker). Gossip is not

the only way Marple uses female styles of communication to her advantage. In her book on golden age British crime fiction, Megan Hoffman points out how, in a tactical move by her, Marple carefully chooses the words she uses, often using qualifiers to disguise her eerily astute observations (Hoffman). This exaggerated performance is a clever misdirection that uses ageist young people and misogynistic men's assumptions about her to her advantage and helping her to successfully extract from them the information she needs (Hoffman 53).

Dr. Kay Scarpetta – Postmortem

Patricia Cornwell's debut novel *Postmortem*, the first installment in what would go on to be a global success surpassing 120 million copies in 36 different languages, features the highly educated forensic pathologist Dr. Kay Scarpetta, the chief medical examiner of Virginia. (Cornwell). Set during the late 1980's in the city of Richmond, *Postmortem* follows Scarpetta as she unravels the mystery behind a series of four murders, identical in their methodology, but with no obvious connection between them. As with most crime and detective fiction, the victims of the murders were all women (Parrott and Parrott), and they were found sexually assaulted, restrained with electrical cords, and died via asphyxiation; the only physical clue was peculiar glittery substance found on the women's bodies.

Scarpetta works alongside seasoned homicide detective Pete Marino, whose character epitomizes the traditional hardboiled, macho investigator. Though Scarpetta and Marino are eventually able to reach an equilibrium of sorts for the sake of the investigation, their relationship is not without its tumult. Marino makes it clear early on that he dislikes working with Scarpetta, undermining both her professional authority and her extensive scientific

expertise, and as Farré-Vidal puts it in their analysis of the *Scarpetta* series, working with her threatens the dominant patriarchal role of men in the workplace, which is a factor especially in workplace environments as traditionally male as law enforcement (Farré-Vidal). As a woman working in that field, Scarpetta is used to the constant challenges to her intelligence due to her simply being a woman. In chapter four, when the fingerprints of the most recent victim's husband are confirmed to be the same as the ones found on a hunting knife in their home—a man whom Scarpetta is certain about the innocence of—despite the lack of evidence suggesting that a knife was the murder weapon and after Scarpetta's analysis concluded that the victims were killed through strangulation, Marino still feels the need to oppose Scarpetta: “[Marino's] eyes smiled in triumph. I was familiar with the look, which I had expected. It said, ‘So there, Ms. Chief. So maybe you got book-learning, but me, I know the street’” (Cornwall 64). As Arlie Hochschild said, women have grown used to a constant discrimination of the basis of their sex, they expect it, receive it, and simply try to get through it (Hochschild 19). Marino shows his need to be right and his insecurity over Scarpetta's education with just a look, implying that she could not possibly know things that he does not. An all too familiar look that Scarpetta is able to interpret immediately.

Despite the enormous success and popularity of the *Scarpetta* series, it was only in 2026 that she was brought to our television screens, thirty-seven years after the publication of the first novel. Cornwall herself attributes this delay to gender bias within the crime fiction industry, “It also didn't happen because Scarpetta isn't a man. In the early days of the series... a lot of people had a hard time with her being a woman” (Cornwall). She also goes on to recount a story about how one bookseller could not handle the fact that Scarpetta is a woman dealing with the grim brutalities of crime and that he had to mentally change all of Scarpetta's pronouns to “he” in

order to even read the book, which shows the extent that some audiences are conditioned to expect men in these investigator positions (Cornwell).

Vera Stanhope – Vera

Based on novels by Ann Cleeves, *Vera* (2011-2025) is a British crime drama series set in rural North Eastern England following Detective Chief Inspector Vera Stanhope, played by Brenda Blethyn, as she investigates intricate and layered murder cases with her team of detectives. The series follows a case-of-the-week format, with each episode covering a different murder or set of murders. Vera's investigative method relies more on interviews with suspects and relatives of victims, collecting clues at scene, and a deep understanding of human motives and behavior. *Vera* focuses on fostering a tone of realism and procedural detail, rather than action scenes solely for the sake of action scenes.

Unlike Scarpetta who primarily relies on technology and forensic evidence, Vera utilizes both her interpersonal and strong deduction reasoning skills to help her solve her cases. Though probably the stronger comparison is to Miss Marple. Like Marple, Vera is an unmarried, childless older woman, and she operates in a rural English environment. She dresses in a utilitarian practical way, not entirely devoid of feminine style, but not orientated toward attractiveness or visual display; she frequently wears both traditionally masculine slacks and button-down shirts, as well as floral bright patterns and skirts often associated with a more feminized style. This, according to De Beauvoir and her theories on the aging woman's treatment in society, would mean that Vera is again an "othered" entity like Marple (De Beauvoir 1949). Not performing the idea of the feminine woman, she would be subjected to similar dismissal or

acts of discrediting, but for the most part, this is not the case. However, unlike Marple, Vera possesses something she does not, her title. As a detective chief inspector Vera moves through the series with an institutional authority granting her an immediate respect and legitimacy not always afforded to Marple.

Something that sets Vera apart from other female detectives in crime fiction is her limited connection to the domestic life typically associated with femininity. Her character seems to resist the patriarchal structure that says she must conform to the warm maternal domestic role expected of women, especially older ones. While she also sometimes utilizes the some of the same tactics as Miss Marple does in her information gathering, more often though Vera is seen as gruff and demanding, evident by the irritation of her team and the surprise of the civilians around her. Though one has to wonder if Vera is actually this grumpy, or is it merely that she is *perceived* like this due to being a woman.

As Walby identifies, domestic labor is an integral part of how our patriarchal society shapes women into caregivers and emotional work (Walby 1990). While Vera clearly shows concern for the wellbeing and safety of the children that she comes into contact with in the context of her investigations, her interactions with them are often restrained and awkward—rather than the maternal nurturance we have been conditioned to expect. This becomes more apparent when Vera is examined against her partner Detective Sergeant Joe Ashworth, a family man, with a wife and three young children. In the very first episode, after Ashworth's third child is born, he hints to Vera about her becoming the child's godmother, to which she ignores the suggestion and moves the conversation back to the case. Ashworth's heavily domestic life is a stark contrast to Vera's simplified, work-orientated existence (Morgan). However, this may simple be a cultural difference between England and the United States. Mann investigates the

societal expectations for emotional displays in the workplace, with there being a stronger assumption of emotional labor performance in the United States than in England, where a more subtle, stoic response is typical for interactions in England (Mann) (Guiberteau).

Marianne “Mare” Sheehan– Mare of Easttown

The Mare of Easttown (2021) is a limited series starring actress Kate Winslet as Mare Sheehan, a detective in the small working-class community of Easttown in Pennsylvania. While investigating the murder of a young girl that shakes the community, Mare is simultaneously dealing with the unresolved and ever-present grief of her son’s suicide. The body of 17-year-old Erin McMamin is found washed up in a creek, naked, bruised and missing a finger, with a single gunshot wound to the head. This tragedy came a year after another local girl, Katie Bailey, had gone missing; her trail had gone cold with her past drug abuse being the reason. She would later be found by Mare and her partner Detective Zabel with another girl, in the attic of Wayne Pott’s home where he held them captive and sexually assaulted them. Though an incredible success for Mare, it came at the cost of Zabel’s life as he was killed by Pott’s during the rescue. In addition to that, it was found that Erin McMamin’s case was entirely unrelated, and her killer remained at large.

In contrast to Kay Scarpetta’s controlled professionalism and cool manner, Mare Sheehan represents a more contemporary version of female authority in crime fiction. In the series’ few, but intense episodes, it systematically illustrates, in both their home and professional life, the way the men’s decisions and societal systemic issues burden and harm women and how women oftentimes have to pick up the slack in order to compensate for these shortcomings.

In Laura Mulvey's feminist analysis of media, she writes on her idea of the male gaze, which is that even film created for and starring women still centers men, that in film women are both looked at and displayed with their appearance coded to satisfy the "to be looked-at-ness" role of a woman (Mulvey 19). Mare, though bound by other aspects of womanhood in film, is allowed to be herself physically. She dresses in typical modest, working-class clothing. Though not the sleek and polished professional clothing worn by Scarpetta, Mare's clothing is more realistic and practical for the work she does. Her hair is simply put up while she is working, though unkempt, perhaps reflecting the mental and emotional strain she functions under, as well as the lack of time.

In feminist film theorist Mary Ann Doane's book *Femmes Fatale: Feminism, Film Studies and Psychoanalysis*, she points out how women are often positioned in film to be objects of desire for the male gaze rather than actual representations of women. Mare subverts this pattern. While filming Mare of Easttown, director Craig Zobel suggested that they could remove her "bulgy bit of belly" during scenes with physical intimacy or photoshop away the lines in her face in promotional posters, Winslet staunchly objected to the digital alteration of her body, arguing that she wanted Mare to be a real-world woman (Badshah). In Winslet's dedication to persevering hers—and by extension Mare's—body from Hollywood's beauty standards and societal expectations for women's bodies in general, Mulvey's male gaze is resisted and challenged (Bolat and Keleş).

Arlie Hochschild introduces the idea of emotional labor in her 1983 book *The Managed Heart*, defining it as the work of managing one's feelings and expressions—by way of suppressing some or the faux performance of others—as a requirement for one's professional role (Hochschild). Mare's responsibilities reach far beyond her position as a detective. In her

homelife, she lives with her elderly mother, with whom she has a contentious but genuine relationship, her teenage daughter Siobhan, who is managing her transition into adulthood by preparing for college while dealing with the death of her older brother. Mare is also responsible for her late son's young child, Drew, whom she has been raising since his death. Divorced, with the stress of Mare's dedication to her career and the grief over the loss of their son being the main contributing forces, Mare watches her ex-husband Frank move on with a new family just across the street and his limited active involvement with their shared grandson and daughter. Despite the multitude of personal stressors Mare is enduring, she is still committed to the town (Bolat and Keleş). Within the community of Easttown, Mare is known not just as a detective, but as a caretaker and a backbone of the town itself. She is personally known by residents, and despite her exhaustion, she shows up for them handling smaller crimes like neighborhood disputes and acting as a protector of the daily peace while bearing witness to and holding space for their grief (Ford). It is exactly this emotional connection to the townspeople that enables Mare to put together the final piece of the puzzle that brings answers to the case. It's her relationships with others that separate her from her male counterparts in other crime fiction.

Conclusion

The female investigator is not a simplistic, static figure plagued by stereotypes and tropes, she is now a place where societal expectations about gender, credibility, and labor are constantly being readjusted. Across the pieces of media examined through this paper, these female investigators are shaped by patriarchal and institutional limitations as they work within and against them.

From the strategic invisibility of Miss Marple, whose other status allows her to acquire knowledge efficiently because she is underestimated, to Scarpetta's fight to prove her legitimacy within her male-dominated forensic and law enforcement environment, the female investigator is constantly in a battle to prove her competency and credibility in a way her male counterparts are not. Vera, at the same time, subverts expectations through her emotionally restrained professionalism and her gruff personality, while still existing in Beauvoir's framework on age and gender. In contrast, Mare reflects a very modern iteration of what it means to be a woman and an investigator, one where emotional labor, personal grief, and responsibility to her community are all inseparable. Observed together, these characters illustrate not a straightforward path to equality, but a winding, sometimes contradictory evolution.

Some factors not taken into account during analysis for this research paper were race and ethnicity, as well as sexual orientation. All women examined were white, cisgender women either not engaged in any partnered relationship or in a heterosexual one. Gender and sexual orientation of the authors was another potential factor not taken into account for the purposes of this paper. All of these aspects could greatly affect how female investigator characters are presented, especially in more contemporary adaptations within the crime fiction genre. Further study into this topic would benefit from verification into how these differences might apply and alter presentation of these female characters. In addition to this, media and film from other countries may be another way to examine what the female detective can be.

Given the pervasive role of television and streaming services in our everyday lives, how female investigators are portrayed contributes to the continuous cultural conversation about who women can be and how they are expected to function in their roles. In comparison from early female investigators like Miss Marple to more modern ones like Mare, there is no doubt that

progress has been made in terms of what a female investigator can be and do. As the crime genre continues to evolve, room still remains for the development of these female investigators. There are countless ways in which more diversity and representation could be brought in. As long as people continue to engage with crime media and enjoy what, as Edgar Allan Poe, often credited as the father of the detective novel, called the sheer delight of literary “analysis,” there is no limit to the growth of the genre (Poe 1984).

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