



ЕКПХРАСИС IN DETECTIVE FICTION: FIVE LITTLE PIGS BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

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The article examines ekphrasis as an intermedial phenomenon in fictional literature, focusing on its narrative and interpretative functions in detective fiction. Being characterised as a verbal representation of visual art, ekphrasis enables the transformation of visual imagery into textual form and encourages readers to create their own mental image of the described artwork. Due to the absence of fixed definition and boundaries of the concept in contemporary literary studies, the article focuses on the diversity of scholarly approaches to ekphrasis and explores its role in literary discourse, namely detective fiction. The research is based on Agatha Christie's detective novel *Five Little Pigs*, in which a fictional painting plays a significant role in the reconstruction of the crime. As the painting has no real equivalent in art history, it becomes a key narrative element in the story, being described exclusively through the verbal testimonies of different characters. The absence of a real visual referent allows various interpretations of the same painting, which is shaped by characters' memory of the item, as well as their emotional involvement. The analysis shows that the characters' evaluations of the artwork are divided into positive and negative. Positive responses point out vitality, emotional input and artistic brilliance, while negative ones focus on technical flaws, incorrect composition and perspective. Critical remarks can be followed by softening disclaimers, allowing the speakers to distance themselves from full responsibility for their judgements. The painter's imagined visualization of the future artwork can also be seen as a form of ekphrasis, showing that ekphrastic representation is not limited to the verbal description of an existing visual object, but is also possible in the absence of a material artefact. The article concludes that ekphrasis in *Five Little Pigs* serves not only as a descriptive device but also as an important narrative tool in the structure of the novel. By offering multiple, occasionally conflicting viewpoints on a single artwork, ekphrasis engages readers to participate and create their own interpretation of the imagined artwork.

ЕКФРАЗИС У ДЕТЕКТИВНІЙ ПРОЗІ: «П'ЯТЕРО ПОРОСЯТ» АГАТИ КРІСТІ

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Ключові слова:

інтермедіальність, вербальна репрезентація, образотворче мистецтво, детективна проза, наративна функція.

Стаття досліджує екфразис як інтермедіальне явище у художній літературі, зосереджуючись на його наративних та інтерпретаційних функціях у детективній прозі. Характеризуючись як вербальна репрезентація образотворчого мистецтва, екфразис уможливіє трансформацію візуальних образів у текстову форму та заохочує читачів до створення власного ментального образу описаного твору мистецтва. Через відсутність чітко окресленої дефініції та меж поняття у сучасних літературознавчих дослідженнях, стаття зосереджується на різноманітності наукових підходів до екфразису та досліджує його роль в межах літературного дискурсу, зокрема у детективній прозі. Дослідження базується на детективному романі Агати Крісті «П'ятеро поросят», у якому фікційний витвір мистецтва відіграє значну роль у реконструкції злочину. Оскільки картина не має реального аналога в історії мистецтв, вона стає ключовим наративним елементом оповіді, будучи описаною виключно через вербальні свідчення різних персонажів. Відсутність реального візуального референта уможливіє різні інтерпретації однієї і тієї самої картини, що формуються за допомоги спогадів персонажів про цей об'єкт, а також їх емоціональної залученості. Аналіз показує, що оцінки героїв твору мистецтва поділяються на позитивні і негативні. Позитивні відгуки відзначають життєвість, емоційне наповнення та художню майстерність, тоді як негативні зосереджуються на технічних недоліках, неправильній композиції та перспективі. Критичні зауваження можуть супроводжуватися пом'якшувочими застереженнями (дисклеймерами), що дистанціюють оповідача від повної відповідальності за висловлення своєї оцінки. Уявна візуалізація художником майбутнього твору мистецтва також може розглядатися як форма екфразису, що свідчить про те, що екфрастична репрезентація не обмежується вербальним описом існуючого візуального об'єкта, а є можливою і за відсутності матеріального артефакту. У висновках до статті підсумовується, що екфразис у детективному романі «П'ятеро поросят» слугує не лише описовим прийомом, а й важливим наративним інструментом у структурі роману. Пропонуючи множинні, іноді суперечливі точки зору щодо художнього твору, екфразис залучає читачів до активної участі та спонукає їх формувати власну інтерпретацію уявного твору мистецтва.

Problem statement. Based on the understanding of ekphrasis as an intermedial phenomenon which links visual art and verbal narrative, the following article examines its functioning in fictional literature. Due to the lack of fixed boundaries of the concept, particular attention is paid to the ways in which verbal representation of visual artworks creates meaning within the narrative and shape readers' perception of the described artwork. This problem is closely connected with the ongoing debates in literary and cultural studies regarding the cognitive and communicative roles

of ekphrasis. The article focuses on the detective novel *Five Little Pigs* by Agatha Christie, in which a fictional painting plays a significant role in the narrative. As the described work of art exists only through the verbal testimonies of the main characters, the novel serves as an example for exploring the connection between visual art and verbal narrative.

The **aim** of the article is to analyse ekphrasis as an intermedial phenomenon in fictional literature and to determine its functions in the structure of detective fiction.

The **objectives** of the article are:

1. to analyse the theoretical approaches to ekphrasis in literary studies;

2. to examine the specific features of ekphrasis in belles-lettres literature using Agatha Christie's *Five Little Pigs* as a case study;

3. to identify the narrative functions of ekphrasis in detective fiction.

The **object** of the study is ekphrasis in belles-lettres literature.

The **subject** of the study is the functioning of ekphrasis in the detective narrative, exemplified by Agatha Christie's novel *Five Little Pigs*.

Ekphrasis in literary studies is defined as an intermedial phenomenon in which visual art is represented through verbal narrative. In literature this process involves the translation of a visual object into words, allowing readers to create a mental image of an artwork in their mind through textual description. The use of ekphrasis in the text is carried out in one direction – from the visual to the verbal code, i.e. a picture or other art objects are described in the text. The starting point in ekphrasis is a work of art that enriches the literary text and contributes to its meaning.

The term *ekphrasis* originates from Greek and dates back to antiquity. It is mentioned in ancient Greek rhetorical manuals known as the *Progymnasmata*, which were produced during the 2nd-6th centuries. The term *ekphrasis* is derived from the prefix *ek* ("from"/ "out of") and the root *phrasis* from the verb *phrazein*, meaning "to tell" or "to declare" [Wagner, 1996, p. 12]. One of the earliest examples is the description of Achilles' shield in Homer's *Iliad*.

Historically, ekphrasis was employed as a rhetorical tool, emphasizing the creation of vivid mental images through verbal description. The term was understood within the rhetorical tradition as a descriptive technique capable of stimulating the imagination of the listener or reader. Philosophical concepts such as *enargia* (or *evidentia*), meaning "visible", played a significant role in these interpretations. These qualities were meant not only to inform, but also to create a vivid mental image in the mind of the reader or listener, as if they were directly witnessing the described scene. Rhetoricians aimed to master the power of description to create certain illusions to transform the "audience" into "almost viewers" [Goldhill, 2007, p. 3; Semerenko, Pliushchal, 2022, p. 51]. In this understanding, the main purpose of the description was to evoke the imagined presence of a scene before the eyes of the audience. Although the artworks themselves are often considered to be "silent", due to the phenomenon of ekphrasis they appear to be rather "talkative, full of virtual discourses" [Wagner, 1996, p. 1].

The gradual narrowing of the term *ekphrasis* from the description of scenes and narratives to the depic-

tion of visual artworks took place later. One example is the collection of texts by Philostratus the Younger, *Images*, which consisted only of descriptions of artworks and where the term *ekphrasis* was explicitly mentioned.

The modern discussion of the definition of *ekphrasis* began in the mid-19th century and continues to the present day. The key definition, "a verbal representation of a visual representation", was given by J. Heffernan, pointing out the core essence of the term and focusing on its ability to convey visual images through verbal means [Heffernan, 1993, p. 3]. According to this definition, *ekphrasis* presents one artistic medium, namely visual art, through another medium, language. This understanding provided a basis for further research and discussions. Heffernan's interpretation is connected to the concept of *paragone*, which emphasizes the tension and rivalry between verbal and visual forms of representation [ibid]. Contemporary approaches to the understanding of the term provided a basis for continued scholarly discussions about the definition of the term and its conceptual limits. The main strategy in studying the term *ekphrasis* was to focus on its current meaning rather than the ancient one, in order to explore its specific features.

Building on Heffernan's definition, other scholars further explore the range of ekphrasis in literature. D. Carrier similarly describes ekphrasis as "a verbal re-creation of the visual artwork" and "a verbal re-creation of a story, depicted in a painting", highlighting the possibility of identifying and visualising an art object without seeing it directly [Carrier, 1991, p. 8, 103]. M. Krieger notes that "a study that parades under the name of ekphrasis can be many things", reflecting the diversity of its definitions and applications [Krieger, 1992, pp. 10–11].

In contemporary literary studies, ekphrasis is understood as a technique that enables writers to convey the visual and emotional qualities of artworks, creating a mental image in the reader's mind. V. Francis emphasizes that ekphrasis, while often described as a "literary response to visual art", allows authors to extend their interpretation of the original artwork, exploring hidden and symbolic meanings [Francis, 2011, p. 708]. Being referred to as "an act of revelation", a writer is able to expand their initial vision of the primary artwork, delving deeper into the hidden meanings presented by the visual stimulus. S. Goldhill highlights that "we read to become lookers", since ekphrasis "is designed to produce a viewing subject" [Goldhill, 2007, p. 2]. Moreover, there is always the writer who transmits the message about the depicted work of art from the artist to the reader.

A gradual shift away from the idea of *paragone* took place. Rather than being treated as competing

forms of art, verbal and visual forms of representation are now understood as complementary and closely connected. This approach makes it possible to study ekphrasis as an interaction between different art forms rather than as a form of rivalry.

D. Kennedy criticizes the notion of ekphrasis as merely “*intermedial transposition*” or the transfer of an image from one artistic medium to another. From his perspective, ekphrasis is understood as the experience of encountering a work of art. Kennedy rejects the idea of a conflict between the verbal and the visual, interpreting ekphrasis instead as an attempt to bring art into everyday life and imperfect reality [Kennedy, 2012, p. 6]. Furthermore, ekphrasis can convey the author’s individual literary style as well reflect the historical and cultural context in which the artwork was created. In line with this view, L. Heneraliuk characterises ekphrasis as “*a verbal description of visual works of arts, accompanied by an aesthetic assessment, or by a description of author’s techniques, including his manner or style*” [Heneraliuk, 2018, p. 188]. The intersemiotic translation and code-switching attempt to maximize the readers’ visualization of the artefact verbally described in the text.

C. Clüver also notes that the classical definition of ekphrasis within the framework of the *paragone* concept has become less accepted. He defines ekphrasis as “*the verbal representation of a real or fictitious text composed in a non-verbal sign system*” [Clüver, 1997, p. 26]. In a later work this definition is revised and changed to “*the verbal representation of real or fictive configurations composed in a non-kinetic visual medium*” [Clüver, 2017, p. 33]. The concept of ekphrasis is broadened, with the focus shifting in its definition from the referent, or the object which is depicted, to the representation of the created image itself. Visual and verbal art are no longer seen as competing with each other or existing in the hierarchy of representation. Instead, the emphasis is moved to the internal experience and perception of the artwork by the reader. The artwork is presented in the text through the lens of the writer’s own perspective, reflecting their individual vision and interpretation.

In belles-lettres literature, and particularly in detective fiction, ekphrasis functions not only as a descriptive device but also as a mechanism for narrative process. It allows multiple subjective perspectives on a single artwork, encouraging the reader to actively interpret the text. This feature aligns with the structural principles of detective narratives, which often rely on conflicting testimonies, evidence and reconstruction of the events.

Since detective stories focus on identifying the culprit, ekphrasis can reveal the relationship and attitudes of each character towards the artwork, which may serve as a clue. At the same time, it may mislead

the reader by highlighting or hiding certain details, adding suspense and unexpected twists of the story.

Five Little Pigs is a classical detective story by Agatha Christie in which the renowned detective Hercule Poirot investigates the murder of a painter which took place many years ago. The story begins when a young woman, Carla Lemarchant, asks the detective to prove the innocence of her mother, who was convicted of poisoning her husband, Carla’s father. In order to establish the truth, Hercule Poirot is compelled to interview key witnesses of the case, searching for the real murder among them.

Each witness is asked to recall the details of the day when the murder was committed, the painter’s behavior, and their opinion of the unfinished painting of a young woman, who the artist was romantically involved with. In addition to the legal experts involved in the case – the Counsel for the Defence, the Counsel for the Prosecution, the young and old Solicitors, the Police Superintendent – Poirot examines the brothers Philip and Meredith Blake; Lady Dittisham, the artist’s former love and muse; Cecilia Williams, the governess; and Angela Warren, the artist’s daughter.

Since the discussed painting is fictional and has no real-life prototype, it exists only through the subjective descriptions provided by the characters, creating multiple interpretations of the same artwork. Each witness constructs a distinct version shaped by their individual perception and visual memory. It encourages readers to constantly compare different perspectives and create their own version of the described canvas in mind. The following description is neutral and depicts the visual composition of the painting: “*At first sight it might have been a poster, so seemingly crude were its contrasts. A girl, a girl in a canary-yellow shirt and dark-blue slacks, sitting on a grey wall in full sunlight against a background of violent blue sea. Just a kind of subject for a poster*” [Christie, 2013, p. 113]. The description focuses mainly on such details as the main figure, background, colours and contrasts, emphasizing spatial arrangement, lighting and the visual interplay between the figure and the setting. The emphasis is on technical aspects rather than emotional impact, which provides readers with a clear mental image of the painting.

In *Five Little Pigs* the characters’ opinions on the painting are divided into positive and negative evaluations. Several characters reflect about the painting positively, showing admiration for the artist’s skills, energy and emotional impact. The painting is described as “*good – no doubt of that*” [Christie, 2013, p. 16] and “*very fine – very fine indeed*” [Christie, 2013, p. 32]. The energy of the painting is admired and although it has “*an old superficial smoothness*” [Christie, 2013, p. 113], it also shows “*an amazing brilliance and clarity in the light*” [ibid].

The characters are struck by its energy, vibrancy and expression of youth and vitality: “*All there was, all there could be of life, of youth, of sheer blazing vitality...So much life! Such passionate youth!*” [ibid]. Detective Poirot is, in particular, visibly impressed, which can be judged by his reaction – “*Poirot caught his breath*” [Christie, 2013, p. 112], “*...Poirot realized at once what a superb artist the man had been*” [Christie, 2013, p. 113].

The artist’s mental visualization of his future masterpiece can also be considered a form of ekphrasis: “*I’ll paint a picture of you that will make the fat-headed world hold its sides and gasp!*” [Christie, 2013, p. 129] and “*I want to paint you so that that picture will be the finest thing I’ve ever done*” [Christie, 2013, p. 207]. These examples demonstrate his engagement in work by predicting the positive reaction of the audience.

The painter’s dedication to the painting dominated his life and further decisions, where art took over relationships: “*Any ethics he had would have applied to painting. He wouldn’t, I’m convinced, have painted a sloppy, bad picture – no matter what the inducement*” [Christie, 2013, p. 28], “*But he’d started painting her down here, and he wanted to finish that picture. Nothing else mattered to him*” [Christie, 2013, p. 87]. This obsession is also emphasized through a personification when the unfinished painting is described almost as if it were alive: “*The unfinished picture began to haunt Amyas*” [Christie, 2013, p. 207].

However, not all the characters share the same admiration for the painting. Some respond with sharp criticism, often highlighting technical mistakes with irony and extreme exaggeration. One dismissed the artwork as “*a sloppy, bad picture*” [Christie, 2013, p. 28]. Another offers a more vivid, but critical reflection of the distortions, describing it as “*lopsided*”: “*You should have seen that picture Crale was painting. All lopsided. He made the girl look as though she’d got a toothache, and the battlements were all cock-eye. Unpleasant looking, the whole thing. I couldn’t get it out of my mind for a long time afterwards. I even dreamt about it*” [Christie, 2013, p. 57]. The dissatisfaction is reinforced in the following passage, questioning the artist’s choice: “*Why can’t a painter paint something nice and cheerful to look at? Why go out of your way to look for ugliness?*” [ibid].

The painter’s mistakes are clearly criticized, including his poor drawing skills, incorrect perspective and incorrect anatomy: “*Why, he couldn’t even draw! His perspective was terrible! Even his anatomy was quite incorrect*” [Christie, 2013, p. 141]. His artwork is also mocked for its lack of structure and carelessness, described as just random splashes of colour on the canvas: “*...these daubs of Mr Crale’s are really ludicrous. Just splashing a few colours*

about on the canvas – no construction – no careful drawing” [ibid].

The ekphrasis can reveal the narrator’s age and moral views, as illustrated in the following example. The old governess, Cecilia Williams, criticizes the depicted girl for wearing revealing clothes and heavy make-up: “*The girl was a good looker, all right...Lots of make-up and next to no clothes on. It isn’t decent these girls go about... Nowadays one wouldn’t think of it. But then – well, it shocked me. Trousers and one of those canvas shirts, open at the neck – and not another thing, I should say!*” [Christie, 2013, p. 57]. This shows that the narrator is older and, as a result, holds more traditional views.

At the same time, negative remarks are softened by disclaimers, allowing speakers to distance themselves from full responsibility for their judgement, as in “*I’m just passing on the impression I got*” [Christie, 2013, p. 58].

The denouement of the story reveals that the woman portrayed in the painting, the artist’s lover Elsa Greer, was in fact the murderer. Anticipating that the painter would soon lose interest in her as his muse and return to his wife once the portrait is completed, she poisons him, ensuring that both their relationship and the artwork remain unfinished. Consequently, the painting becomes a silent witness to this crime. The detective Hercule Poirot notes that it was “*the picture of a murderess painted by her victim – it is the picture of a girl watching her lover die...*” [Christie, 2013, p. 274].

Overall, in *Five Little Pigs* Agatha Christie appears to use ekphrasis to demonstrate how one single painting can provoke a range of different responses, both positive and negative. While some characters admire the painting for its technical skill, emotional impact and vitality, others focus on its flaws, such as perspective or use of colour. The artist’s own imagination of the future masterpiece demonstrates that a work of art can exist both in reality and in mind, and may also be interpreted as an example of ekphrasis. By presenting contrasting opinions, Agatha Christie may be encouraging readers to visualize the painting themselves and experience it through the lens of their own individual perception.

Conclusions. The analysis of Agatha Christie’s *Five Little Pigs* demonstrates that ekphrasis functions as a central narrative tool in detective fiction. The painting in the novel exists only through the verbal descriptions of the characters, and each witness constructs a distinct version of it based on personal perception and memories. As a result, the painting is presented from multiple perspectives.

Characters’ evaluations are divided into positive and negative. Positive assessments highlight the artist’s skills, energy and emotional impact, whereas negative focus on technical mistakes, distorted

composition and perspective, sometimes softened by disclaimers that allow the speaker to distance themselves from full responsibility. This variety of perspectives prevents the formation of a single authoritative interpretation of the artwork and instead invites the reader to take a position of their own in relation to both the painting and the characters who describe it.

Moreover, the painter's own visualization of the future painting functions as a form of ekphrasis, illustrating that the artwork exists in the literary text initially as a mental and then a material object.

To sum up, ekphrasis in the detective novel contributes to the reconstruction of the crime, requiring the reader to compare testimonies and form a personal understanding of the artwork. Further research may consider examining the role of ekphrasis in other detective novels and genres, exploring how it influences the reader's visualization of fictional artworks.

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