



AGATHA CHRISTIE AS A NOVELIST OF DETECTIVE FICTION: A NOTE

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An Abstract

This Paper analyses the form of 'detective fiction' as a kind of sub-genre emerging during the Victorian Age, ranked as a separate genre among the other fictional forms with Agatha Christie as the World's most popular mystery writer of all times to have thrilled millions of readers of generations with her special attention on characters and intriguing situations proving herself to be the world's best-selling detective and mystery writer.

It is generally understood that 'detective fiction' is a kind of sub genre emerging during the Victorian Age, being ranked as a separate genre among the other varieties of fiction like historical novel. No doubt, it did enjoy wide popularity and universal appeal. According to Dorothy L. Sayers, a removed detective novelist of the twentieth century, defined a detective novel as "one which possesses an Aristotle an perfection of beginning, middle and end. A definite and single problem is set, worked out and solved, its conclusion is not arbitrarily conditioned by marriage of death" (Haycraft 101). Agatha Christie is a well-known novelist of detective fiction whose writing career spanned more than half a century.

'Detective fiction' helps the reader to view from close quarters crime and its consequences. Just as the viewing of a tragedy cleansed the spectator, the detective novels made man a better being after exposing him to vice. The detective, the embodiment of forces of justice was able to discover and red society of the forces of evil symbolized by the criminal the society does experience a sense of regeneration and the reader would be assured that though evil may enter the world, the detective would destroy it before it becomes all pervasive. He knows that "good will triumph and order to be restored" (Morgan 258).

The central character or the protagonist in any detective novel was the detective who always emerged victorious. The detective hero exhibited superhuman powers and he was shown to be superior to all the other around him. Dorothy Sayers viewed him as the modern representative of the knights of yore. To Nicholas Blake, he was "the Fairy Godmother of twentieth century folk myth" (Haining 9). Chesterton saw him as "the agent of social justice who is the original and poetic figure" (Hay craft 6). The evil force he represented was vanquished by the forces of good personified in the detective. The crime in the detective novel was not an end in itself. It was only a means towards the goal-detection. The mystery that arise & due to the crime, could be solved by the application of logic and reason. The crime was usually murder, which was to be done with expertise in order to sustain interest. The crime was seen as the work of an individual. It was "small holes torn in the fabrics of society" (Symons 148). The earliest examples of detection are to be found in the Apocrypha which are stories dealing with Daniel's wisdom. The literary origins of crime and detective stories can be traced back to the **New Gate Calendars or Aannals** which were records of confessions and dying speeches of criminals, published by Rev. John Villette in four volumes of criminals entitled **The Annals of New gate or the Malefactors register**. Alexander. Duma's **Le Vicomte de Bragalonne** (1848) dealt with detection in an episode. Defoe's novels had as their focus and the criminals, drawn from real life as in the life of Jonathan Wild (1725) or fictional as in **Moll Flanders** (1722).

Detective fiction, truly speaking, began with Edger Allan Poe, who is called "The Father of detective Fiction". The heroine of Wilkie Collins's **The Law and the Lady** (1875) was the first woman detective whose investigations were based on a step by step deduction. Anna Katherine Green was acclaimed as the "Mother of the detective novel" (Mann 27). Detective novels were seen in terms of three varieties, one was the "Classic Puzzle" that was popular during the Golden Age of detective fiction. Agatha Christie was the Chief exponent of this type. The next one was the "hand burl'd dick" stories about the American next type was the "procedural story" showing policeman at work. The 1920 ushered in the Golden Age of detective fiction as some of the best novels were produced during this period. The major novelists who published during this period were Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers and S.S. Van Dine.

Greatly acknowledged as the world's most popular mystery writer of all times, Agatha Christie is said to have thrilled millions of readers for generations, with her special attention and care on characters and intriguing situations, proving herself to be the world's best-selling detective and mystery writer. Generally speaking, Agatha Christie's mysteries baffle, confound but always entertain. Her classic novels of deduction have thrilled and delighted half of several hundred million readers for more than a century. She has to her credit publication of such works as **The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Murder on the Orient Express, The Mystery of the Blue Train, 4.50 from Paddington, Thirteen at Dinner The Mirror Crack'd from side to side, Nemesis and then there were None**. Agatha Christie herself describes the creation of her detective:



“He should have been an Inspector, so that he would have a certain knowledge of crime. He would be a meticulous, very tidy. A tidy little man. I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square, instead of round. And he should be very brainy – have little grey coils of the mind” (PP 263-64).

Agatha has introduced a legendary figure in detective fiction, the incomparable Hercule Poirot who was seen as a “Pompous little Belgian sleuth” (Haycraft 50). His deductions were due to the work of his “little grey cells”. A parallel could be drawn between Max Mallowan, Agatha’s second husband and her detective Mann remarks as:

“Both assemble material evidence from which they will make deductions, must be very praise about detail and perceive tiny clues, make intuitive assumptions about human behaviour. Both are essentially detached from the subject of their research” - (P84).

Hercule Poirot often exclaims as:

“Seeing things with their own eyes is not always to see the truth one must see with eyes of the mind. One must employ the little calls of grey” (Third Girl 37).

‘order’ and ‘method’ were his Gods. Hercule Poirot was neat and dapper always in any dire situations. A certain harmless vanity was a characteristic of Poirot.

Hercule Poirot was not part of the male active or heroic stereotype but rather of the contemplative being. His method was characterized by the observation and ordering of facts. Psychology and intuition played a part in his deductions. He was not aristocratic when placed beside the detective heroes of Sayers or Allingham. He personified what the English felt about foreigners and as was thus, familiar and acceptable to the readers. He had “an instinct for discovering the truth and could by a twist of his nimble mind dispose an alibi or uncover a guilty secret” (Watson 167). In the words of George Grella, “Poirot naturally employs his magic for good purposes, insuring that the fabric of society will be repaired after the temporary disruption of murder” (Barnard 36). The psychology frequently referred to by Poirot was not of the Freudian kind but was “a bleazy generalization about how people behave. It was the sort of folk wisdom about human behavior, one might expect from an advice to the loverlorn column” (P54).

In **Murder on the Orient Express**, everyone travelling on the train is viewed as a potential murderer. This can be seen as a supreme instance of the least likely person as the murderer. This novel is also an expression of the many ways by which a reader can be misled about a fictional crime. He is misled about the motive and the time of the murder. The train journey was a recurrent motif in Christie’s fiction. Many of her stories are centered around a railway track. The Mystery of the Blue Train 4.50 from Paddington are some of the books of Agatha Christie which are good examples of this theory. Agatha had travelled by the Orient Express just before Christmas in 1931. It provided the setting and some of her characters, some of the people she encountered have fictional parallels in the novel. The background of the story, a railway carriage, was useful to construct a private world for the travellers. It presented “an ordered, logical way of proceeding, interrupted by occasional glimpses of the irrationality of human beings and randomness of events” (Morgan 70). This fulfilled Agatha Christies usual closed world thus excluding the possibility of an outsider being involved which makes it more peculiar and exciting. Even from the beginning of this book, Christie cleverly weaves a mysterious and enthralling background for the reader. A foreboding element of drama is aptly revealed by the delivery of M.Bouc to Poirot,

“All around us are people, of all classes, of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days, those people, those strangers to one another are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. At the end of three days they part, they go their several ways, never, perhaps, to see each other again” (MOE 21).

To this Poirot replies, “And yet perhaps, in an accident all those here are linked together by death” (MOE 21). Murder is viewed as an offence against God and society. “It is unique in that it abolishes the part it injures, so that society has to take the place of the victim and on his behalf demand restitution or grant forgiveness; it is the crime in which society has a direct



interest” (Auden 149). But murder here in this novel **Murder on the Orient Express** does not follow this universal pattern. The murder of Ratchelt alias Cassetti is an act of violation and the passengers on the train are murders in the normal sense. But here they form the representatives of society which seeks justice or retribution on a killer who could not be convicted. Sympathy was never solicited for the dead Ratchalt. Ratchette by kidnapping Daisy Armstrong had caused the deaths of her father, mother and unborn sibling and her nursery maid indirectly and this led to his death. The world’s horror at kidnapping is captured and capitalized by Agatha Christie here in this book. The second novel of Agatha Christie’s featuring Hercule Poirot is **Thirteen at Dinner**, the title of which was changed by film makers as **Lord Edgare Dies**. This is because of a ‘belief in superstition’ followed by the whole world. Poirot’s inordinate pride was matched only by his unerring skill as a detective extraordinaire ! “Poirot is one of the breed of detectives who keep their deductions to themselves until the last chapter, sometimes hinting of them tantalizingly. Poirot always has the desire to keep all the treads in his own hands upto the last minute. He must play the denouement in his own way” (Peril at End House 63).

Agatha Christie makes Poirot parody Holmes’ instant deductions. This “demonstrates Christie’s great skill at manipulating reader effect within the confining conventions of her genre” (Steward 317). By parodying Holmes, she reveals that “hers is no simple fairy tale world” (Sic). The Freudian interpretation of the ‘Classis Clue Puzze’ views the criminal and detective as representatives of “the Id the super ego, the urgent hostile drives of the self and the controlling, socially responsible force that represses them” (knight 112). The criminal is seen as a baser human being than the detective. He/she acts out of basic urges-greed for wealth and social position in this case. ‘Love of money’ plays an important part in this mystic novel. Charlotta Adams is blamed with this affliction by Poirot. To Hastings, he remarks, “Love of money might lead such a one from the prudent and cautious path. . . if you care for money too much, it is only the money you see, everything else is in shadow” (TAD 6).

In this novel, Agatha Christie has portrayed some significant, powerful women characters. These particular females are epitomized as strong and impressive more so than the male ones. Jane Wikinson, Lady Edgware is a betwitchingly beautiful actress. She is the protagonist of this story and the whole mystery revolves around her. She is ‘belle femme’ and egoism is immensely etched in her nature. She twists the male gender to play to her tune. She swept off, without a shade of apology, all to her schedule impetuously, she had the power to enslave men. “She had desired and interview with Poirot and had carried her point and obtained her desire without delay” (TAD142). Poirot adds by saying, “She wishes to arrange the universe to her manner of thinking” (TAD 145). In both the books, Hercule Poirot comes out with flying colours all the traits which Agatha Christie had bestowed on him are gleaned. He is a dandy, dapper and pompous human being. But he is ruthless in his dealings with the murderers at the same time showing also humane and benevolent feelings on the deserving killers.

To conclude, Agatha Christie has shown herself to be great in these works and the readers are found to be trapped, with her irresistible charm as the ‘Queen of Crime’. When considered alongside other women detective novelists like Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham and P.D. James proved the uniqueness of her craft. Agatha Christie is chiefly remembered for legitimizing intuition by equating it to an unconscious awareness, based on available facts.

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