
Agatha Christie (1890–1976)

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For the greater length of her critical reception, Agatha Christie has been praised as an ingenious puzzle-plotter. “Agatha Christie had the intellect and technical skill to make of the clue-puzzle” the ideal narrative mode for her time, argues Stephen Knight. “She isolated in her technically brilliant plots, her restrained characterization and subtle thematic nuances just what a dedicated reader could hope for as a fictional defence against feared crime” (2004: 89). The golden age “whodunit” presents all the clues needed to solve the murder, alongside a plethora of “red herrings” to confuse the issue. Typically, it involves a closed community of suspects (a train, a girl’s school, a village) most of whom could be the murderer, as revealed through the process of the detection. “Each character is of interest to us, for each is a genuine suspect. No-one can be fully developed, however, for the very nature of the game requires that Christie spread her attention about equally among her relatively large cast” (Merrill 1997: 89). The pleasure of such a text is in trying to solve the puzzle by analyzing all the information and arriving at the murderer before the unmasking in the denouement (see Rowland, chapter 8 in this volume).

And the narrative is inclusive with regards to the reader. In *Cards on the Table* (1936) Christie literally does lay all her cards on the table by reproducing typographically the four bridge scores of the suspects because Poirot insists that they hold the key to solving the murder. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* Christie first gives a diagram of the murdered woman’s room (with door openings and significant furniture), has Hastings note in minute detail all the clues Poirot finds there and then has Poirot delineate five of his six important things (though not why they are significant). Here the reader is being addressed and invited to engage in the puzzle by a supremely readerly narrative. An awareness of the reader is included within the parameters of the process of narration. Pierre Bayard argues in *Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?* (2000), citing Roland Barthes’s “Death of the Author,” that not only does the attentive reader become an active participant in the narration but that Christie’s strength lies in her ability to hide from his or her notice the facts in plain view

on the page, a phenomenon that he allies to the Freudian concept of “psychic blindness.”

This combination of pleasurable activity in the reader and ingenious plot-twists has proved phenomenally successful. Christie has sold over two billion copies worldwide, half of them in translations, her work having been translated into more than 44 languages: Sova claims that “only Shakespeare and the Bible have outsold her” (1996: xiii). However, for the majority of the twentieth century the critical consensus has been that her plotting was her major claim to fame, since her texts presented a cosy, conservative Englishness inhabited by stock characters in a middle-class community, which is restored to order by the elimination of the murderer. “The general critical consensus regarding golden age fiction is that the plot is elevated above all other considerations (often including credibility) and that realistic character development takes a back seat to the construction of the puzzle” (Scaggs 2005: 35). While acknowledging her influence as a crime figure, such criticism tends to dismiss the texts themselves as less interesting because less literary than those of her compatriot Dorothy Sayers. This critical view has, however, been revised during the last decade of the twentieth and the first decade of the twenty-first century.

The most important element in the critical shift has been the acknowledgement of Christie’s complexity. So, for example, one of Christie’s narrative tropes is her manipulation of cultural stereotypes: the major uttering imperialist views, the old maid distrustful of young people, the nurturing nurse companion. The texts deploy these stereotypes against the reader and the text’s investigator, invoking erroneous prejudices that “blind” them to the more complex masked depths. Hastings, Poirot’s earliest sidekick, was used to this effect as the “idiot friend,” but Luke Fitzwilliam plays much the same role in *Murder Is Easy* (1939), finally realizing at the close that his unthinking sexism has made him look in the wrong direction for the killer, “Not a *man* – she never mentioned a *man* – *you* assumed it was a man” (1972: 215). Rather than invoke these stock characters, Christie examines how her characters masquerade within the conventional expectations, thereby reconfiguring the instability and slipperiness of social identities. As Richard York observes,

Christie’s novels are sustained experiments in how people cannot be who they say they are. People are disguised, they are reduplicated, they adopt other selves. ... Most confusingly, perhaps, they pretend to be themselves. (York 2007: 35)

Or as Poirot puts it, in *Peril at End House*: “They were a shade too ‘typical’ ... was it not playing a part just a little too thoroughly?” (1973a: 55). York argues that while Christie’s texts are not postmodern, since the novels close with the presentation of a truth, they do revel in playing with “the seductive power of the perspectives we take for granted” (2007: 22).

Christie’s use of the generic format is not formulaic either, but similarly parodic and playful. Lee Horsley argues that the author is questioning and self-reflexive in

relation to the genre and turns her “preoccupation with the form to more deconstructive ends” (2005: 41). Christie’s novels systematically broke each of the ten rules of the “Detection Club” and Van Dine’s twenty rules, most famously in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), the furore around which brought her to the world’s attention. Although Christie flouted the “rules” of golden age fiction, she practiced a playful deconstruction rather than wholesale destruction. In the Beresford novel, *Partners in Crime* (1929a), the two partners deliberately pastiche twelve of Christie’s contemporary detectives, sometimes with the star detective and at other times with the sidekick solving the crime. Christie’s ability to critique self-reflexively the genre’s conventions points to a complex engagement with the development of the golden age genre.

The biased nature of Raymond Chandler’s analysis of the golden age as safe and cozy has become increasingly evident, with critics arguing persuasively for the disturbing consequences of setting the crimes in such known, domestic environments. Christie’s murderers do not lurk “out there” in the unknown urbanized world of crime but are ensconced within the circle of friends and family. Surely this is more destabilizing to any concepts of the known and safe? Knight suggests that the “intimate danger” is exactly what is disturbing about her texts: “The cause of disorder in her novels is consistently a matter of personal betrayal ... and this sense that you cannot trust anyone at all is a threatening message coded into the whole ‘golden age’ form” (2004: 91). For Knight Christie’s sinister aura derives precisely from this “capacity to realise, in formulaic, repeatable mode a sense of personal unease and possible danger that emerges even in – especially in – a world secluded from social and international disorder” (2004: 92). He challenges commentators who see golden age fiction as “a sunny account” of a stable, coherent society because they “overlook the repetitive traumas of betrayal that are central to the form” (2004: 92–3).

Indeed, one could argue that the unsettling frisson of anxiety surrounding Christie’s crime fiction is the deadly potential embedded in even the most mundane domestic situation. Parents, children, spouses all prove to be lethal family members, while apparent bastions of society – doctors, politicians, wealthy manufacturers, through to the humble “companion” – could also be dangerous. Christie’s texts assume that anyone can be a murderer, no one is exempt, no one totally to be trusted. As Linden Peach argues, the “English middle class between the wars ... was not a coherent group” and the novels’ denouements cannot solve the divisions that have been elaborated between the classes, the generations, and the genders. England is not “reaffirmed at the close” but revealed as fragmented. “The detective story is something of a masquerade. Setting false trails for the reader and presenting them with what is not as it might appear, [it] has at its heart duplicity and performance” (2006: 105–6). It is a “duplicity” that Peach believes extends to the author, determined to fool the reader as an effective “whodunnit” writer.

Christie’s output was phenomenal. During her 57 years of writing she produced 68 crime or mystery novels and over 100 short stories (not to mention the

6 romances, 19 plays and 3 volumes of poems). Given such an oeuvre, perhaps the one thing that can be confidently asserted is that, despite the formulaic similarities of much of her crime fiction, it is unwise to attempt to make monolithic statements about her work as whole. Certainly to compare *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) to *Endless Night* (1967) or *Hallowe'en Party* (1969) is to encompass a wide variation in types of detective novel and in worlds of detection, from the almost cheerful sifting through the different alibis at the country house by a semi-comic Poirot, where the villain does prove to be the outsider, to the much darker first person narration of a youthful, swinging-sixties psychopath or the unconventional single mother and daughter family at the center of the drowning of a child at an apple-bobbing Halloween party. These murders are less explicable, less reasonable and the denouement more fraught. Christie's last two published novels, *Curtain* (1975) and *Sleeping Murder* (1976), cannot be used for such a comparison since she had been counseled to write the "final" case for both Poirot and Miss Marple during the 1940s and file them away for later publication. Even so, as Robin Woods argues in " 'It was the mark of Cain': Agatha Christie and the murder of mystery," *Curtain*, with its motiveless murders, foreshadows the true crime genre that would come to supersede the golden age puzzle-plots. "Christie portrayed, and in a sense foresaw a new kind of crime that would lie beyond the detective's control" (Woods 1997: 103).

It would, then, be more accurate to acknowledge the ways in which Christie's novels shift and change over 50 years. By the end of World War II, many of Christie's cases are more motiveless and less comforting in their denouement, for all that the killer is apprehended or punished. Certainly the re-evaluation of her work argues for a much more complex, unsettling assessment of Christie's oeuvre and for a recognition that her characterization, her use of the generic expectations and her domestic settings are all anchored in an unfounded trust. Christie's 68 novels have a variety of detectives but she is most closely associated with three enduring serial detectives. I will first examine the novels centering on Poirot and Miss Marple, and then, in the final section, will consider the Beresford novels, which are usually categorized as thrillers rather than detective novels. Christie herself differentiated between them, seeing the former as more pleasurable and less rigorous to write, but the Beresford series and the other thrillers in fact contain some of Christie's most interesting dissections of gender, cultural change, and social instability.

Poirot

Hercule Poirot is the longest running of Christie's detectives, introduced in her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920) and making his final appearances in *Elephants Can Remember* (1972) and *Curtain* (1975). He is featured in 33 novels and 65 short stories: as Bargainnier points out, he appears in 17 novels during the 1920s and 1930s, 11 during the 1940s and 1950s and only 5 in the 1960s and 1970s,

suggesting that Christie was getting progressively tired of his idiosyncrasies (1980: 44). Yet in some of his final appearances (e.g., *Third Girl* [1966], *Hallowe'en Party* [1969], and *Elephants Can Remember* [1972]), Poirot's relationship with Ariadne Oliver (whom Gill calls Christie's "story-writing alter ego" [1990: 73]) enriches his character with an affectionate and amused friendship.

Poirot's traits are well summed up by Sally Munt:

He is a parody of the male myth; his name implies his satirical status: he is a shortened Hercules and a *poirot* – a clown. He is narcissistic, emotive, feline, apparently irrational, eccentric, quixotic, obsessed with the domestic, and socially "other" in that he is a Belgian. ... He is a feminine hero. (1994: 8)

In creating the detective as foreigner in *Styles*, Christie initially developed the stereotype of "otherness," stressing his dandyism, his outrageous moustaches, and his overbearing conceit. Hastings, as the invalided war-hero sent home from the Front (where Poirot was a passive refugee), is contrasted as the man of action voicing an English distaste for Poirot's alien status. He is shocked at Poirot's slow and immaculate dressing, patronizingly amused by his emotional over-reactions and finds his complacency "absurd." In later novels he will disapprove of Poirot reading private letters as "unsporting" behavior. Poirot's effete correctness of attire is deliberately linked to an ordered thought-process that metonymically also becomes inappropriate for English heroic masculinity. Tidiness of dress and of domestic surroundings links via its foreign "otherness" to femininity in Poirot. However, the character does not long remain outlandish. He references the European modernity influencing Britain, the modern exemplar compared to whom Hastings is old-fashioned and out-of-touch.

By the 1930s, Poirot's behavior is less alien, as his tidiness is linked to the clean lines of modernist interiors and his penchant becomes both more familiar and more fashionable. Comments are still made about his being "sartorially ambitious" (*Hallowe'en Party* 1969) but this reads as familiar difference rather than alienated otherness. In Alison Light's interpretation this is a positive attempt to think through the cultural possibilities for a new masculinity after the horrors of World War I.

In his own small way, Agatha Christie's Poirot was part of the quest for a bearable masculinity which would make what had previously seemed even effeminate preferable to the bulldog virtues of 1914. Christie, like Sayers, recognised the impossibility of creating a confident, British middle-class hero in the old mould. (Light 1991: 43)

Rowland links this less heroic masculinity to the burgeoning form of the golden age puzzle plot in both Sayers and Christie, associating the absence of an autocratic characterization with the formal aspects of a readerly text. "Fracturing the heroic mould of masculinity transforms both the detectives and the reader's relation to the novel.

No longer exhibiting a mastery of events, the loss of Holmesian confidence democratises the form” (Rowland 2001: 19).

Poirot, in the prolific interwar years, predominates as Christie’s chosen detective. As Merrill suggests, “Poirot is almost always introduced early, usually with the task of solving a murder committed within the first one hundred pages” (1997: 94), although the variations within the first hundred pages differ widely from his being summoned immediately to view a body to a more developed story before the murder occurs. The detective’s investigation forms the major part of the narrative, sifting through all the relevant clues with “periodical recapitulations of the more important details” (Merrill 1997: 94). His investigations rely predominately on a careful piecing together of the facts in an explicable chain, ignoring no detail, however small and domestic (*The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is partially solved by observing how spills to light a fire are stored on a mantel piece). Simultaneously the detective relies on his knowledge of psychology in relation to the type of killing involved. Some characters, he explains, could perform a timid, panicked murder, others would only perform a dashing and audacious one, while a third type would be methodical and premeditated. While he assumes everyone is capable of murder, Poirot is adamant that no one could commit a murder outside of their “character,” and dismisses false confessions on this very ground. In *Cards on the Table*, he rejects Mrs Lorrimer’s confession immediately: “I am willing to believe that you killed Mr Shaitana – but you cannot have killed him in the way you say you did. No-one can do a thing that is not *dans son caractère*” (Christie 1993: 191). His concentration on the psychological aspect necessarily focuses attention on the minutiae of the characters’ behavior, though Christie’s use of psychology is not developed to any great extent. (An exception is *Appointment with Death* published in 1938 during the rise of fascism and Nazism, where Poirot, aided by a famous psychologist, meditates on the propensity of people to allow themselves to be tyrannized over.)

It is true that the Poirot of the later novels evidences a less confident grasp of the British 1960s and his out-of-datedness may have influenced Christie’s choice to deploy him less often. The effete dandy of *Styles* is less able to comprehend the new dandyism of the Carnaby Street generation in *Third Girl* (1966). Although he is well aware that women would find “The Peacock,” as Mrs Oliver dubs one male character, “exotic and beautiful,” he does not condemn him as the other elderly characters do and instead attempts to explain him via the past, by linking his appearance in silks and satins, with shoulder-length chestnut curls, to Van Dyck’s paintings of cavaliers. He is less comfortable with the young “beatnik” women who reject the glamorous allure of his own prime and acknowledges that he is “too old” to help one “because he did not understand her, because it was not even possible for him to appreciate her” (2002: 301). While the ending belies this acknowledgement and seeks to assert his continuing validity, the claim is not completely effective and Poirot’s sense of being outside of things carries a psychic wound, since the young people are unaware of his fame and importance.

Poirot's overweening pride in his success, his concern for his immaculate appearance, even to physical discomfort – much is made of ill-fitting patent shoes or impractical suits – are important parts of his characterization and though they are modulated through the 50 years from alien to familiar, they always remain because they are a necessity of his characterization. Rowland suggests that one “factor in the anti-heroic detective is the way personal weaknesses and vulnerabilities are not external to the success of investigations but intrinsic to them,” going on to assert that while Poirot is often mocked and despised for “his attention to domestic details and gossip ... his espousal of what are characterised as ‘feminine’ methods of investigation ... prove crucial” (Rowland 2001:19).

These human fallibilities, seen through other's amused eyes, inject an important element of humor into the Poirot texts that is often absent from the Miss Marple novels. On the whole, and I take into account here my earlier admonition not to try to span Christie's enormous output with a monolithic statement, the Poirot novels have a lightness that stems from the detective's fallible comedic qualities. The later Poirot novels have darker overtones, whether of the gathering world war in *Appointment with Death* (1938) or the horrific drowning of a child in order to create a garden in *Hallowe'en Party* (1969). The motives are often less explicable and the surrounding milieu more fractured, because the world Christie depicted was changing and the expectations about detective fiction along with it. But the familiarity of Poirot's weaknesses reassures us that not all has changed and that the famous Belgian detective, for all the xenophobic dismissal of the unappreciative characters, will prevail both in solving the crime and in surprising the reader in the denouement.

Miss Marple

The character of Miss Jane Marple is featured in fewer books than Poirot. Introduced in a series of short stories in 1928 and appearing two years later in her first book-length adventure, *The Murder at the Vicarage* (1930), Miss Marple ended her career with *Nemesis* (1971) and the 1940s-composed *Sleeping Murder* (1976), having assumed the role of detective in 12 novels and some 20 short stories. Gill notes that 12 years separate the first two novels of the series “and another ten years separate the second from the third and fourth” (1990: 181), until Christie was closer to her creation's age.

Where Poirot is the foreign outsider, Miss Marple is the village insider, conversant with all the community. The literary antecedent to Miss Marple, the character of the nosy old spinster with nothing better to do than spy on her neighbors, is found in Anna Katherine Green's Miss Butterworth in *That Affair Next Door* (1897), her second novel after the famous *The Leavenworth Case* (1878) that Christie remembers affectionately in her *Autobiography* (1977). It is in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* that Christie initially creates the elderly spinster, the sister of the narrator who enjoys amateur sleuthing, subsequently recognizing the character's potential as a series detective.