

Anti-Industrial Investigator

Most fictional detectives work in a very similar manner. They make observations, and then they come to conclusions that directly relate to their observations. Sherlock Holmes may find out that someone was in Redirt Street on the night of the crime, but only because he knows every type of mud in London, and that the suspect had muddy shoes. The reasoning is usually very simple, it's the observations that make the story interesting, and a good detective writer will have their detectives and readers make different observations in order to really *wow* us with their detective's conclusion. Miss Marple does not do that. In Miss Marple, it is not actually the observations that are the really interesting part, but the way in which she draws her conclusion from those observations. Miss Marple's reasoning, not her observatory skills, are the main character of the short stories, and it gives the stories a uniquely human character in an era of industrial mathematical detectives.

At first, Miss Marple seems like a very typical turn-of-the-century detective. She uses all of the same methods and draws her observations very similarly to Sherlock Holmes, Poirot, or Father Brown. The books are full of her deducing, inducing, and abducing, and while she's much more of an armchair detective than Holmes for example, she still gets the same sorts of observations that any of the others would. In the story *The Companion*, she and her guests are faced with the complicated mystery of a drowning victim, probably a suicide, but no motivation for it. "No *body*," she says when she's asked how she came to the conclusion that the drowning might have been faked. "That was the real significant fact." (p.110). None of this would be out of place in any other detective story; she notices something the reader likely doesn't, (there being no body after a drowning), and so her conclusion, (that the drowning was faked) is novel. It's

also a very mathematical, and machine-like sort of formula for the story. She gets an input, and then compiles a conclusion. The only problem with this sequence is that it's not actually how she came to her conclusion. If you skimmed this story, you might be left thinking that's the case, but Miss Marple comes to her conclusions much less like a computer and much more like a regular person. In this case, she first got on the track that Ms Barton (our "drowned" character) might not be dead, because, "it does remind me... of little old Mrs. Trout. She drew the old age pension, you know, for three old women who were dead." (p.108). Mrs. Trout is completely unrelated to this case, she has nothing to do with it herself. But Miss Marple remembered it, and it was this experience that actually brought her to a conclusion. Yes, she observed that there was no body, yes, she *could* have reasonably come to the conclusion that there was thus no drowning, but that's not how she got there. She got there, in the very human way, by thinking about other people.

Now it's great if this is just a fun character trait of Miss Marple, that she "solves crimes with her experiences". But the thing that's really interesting about her method is that it allows Agatha Christie to write much more compelling crimes. Miss Marple's method allows her to really get at the biggest question about crime. Why? Now lots of authors give their criminals perfect little reasons to commit their crimes, because you have to have a reason if the detective is to solve it rationally. But real criminals don't always have great reasons. They might do something out of emotion, or a need that others don't understand, or no real reason at all, and Miss Marple can still solve those crimes. Because when Miss Marple comes to her conclusions, the evidence isn't even all that relevant to the conclusion. It's the connection to her experiences that matters. "Her end shows her to be completely unhinged." (p.108) says one of Miss Marple's guests when they hear the story in *The Companion*. But Miss Marple doesn't think Ms Barton

(our drownee) is “unhinged”, because she doesn’t take the evidence and reason the motive out of it. She doesn’t need to guess or deduce, because the evidence is just a similarity to another situation. Mrs. Trout, who committed pension fraud and alerted Miss Marple to the idea that Ms Barton didn’t drown herself also demonstrates the motive for Miss Marple here. Mrs. Trout gave the pension funds she stole away. “Some of the families were very poor, and the old age pension was a great boon to the children.” (p.108) she recalls, and it’s this that gives her the motive for Mrs. Barton, (that she faked her death to collect money). The evidence in the Barton case is actually several degrees separated from the conclusion. For Miss Marple, evidence is a way to see a first similarity, and from there you can conclude a second similarity, a motive. So the proof doesn’t have to point to a motive, and in many real crimes, it doesn’t, because people are often irrational. But as Miss Marple notes, “Everybody is much alike, really.” (p.77) and so as long as it’s already happened, you can see how it happened again.

Miss Marple’s experience based conclusions allow her to solve mysteries that get other more “rational” detectives tricked up. A great example is the story *Motive V. Opportunity*. In this story, Miss Marple and her guests examine a situation where an old man has drawn up a will disinheriting his family in place of a spiritual medium who influenced him. The mystery of the story is that the will, which was placed into a sealed envelope, disappeared after his death, being replaced by a blank paper. The will could only have been replaced by the medium, she was the only one with opportunity, but she of course had no motive to disinherit herself. The man’s family had no opportunity, but they did have a lot of motive. Now the rest of Miss Marple’s guests make all sorts of attempts to find out how the paper in the envelope was blank, and the will missing, but none of them are particularly convincing. “They [the medium] may have believed that Mr. Clode [the old man] had already made a will which benefitted Eurydice Spragg

[the medium] and that this new one might be made for the express purpose of cutting her out... [she] hastily destroys it by fire” (p.62) surmises one of Miss Marple’s guests, and the rest of them all agree that this is the most likely situation. But of course, it’s not very good, it assumes that the medium was mistaken, when she really had no cause to think she was already in the will. The theory works, but only just, because Miss Marple’s guests are so tripped up in reasoning out a motive, that they don’t think about other opportunities. ““Disappearing ink,’ she said. ‘I know it. Many is the time I have played with it as a child’” (p.64) Miss Marple thinks back to her experiences, and comes up with an alternative explanation, that the will was written with invisible ink, it was never replaced, because the will just became blank over time. Her method here works because it cuts through the red herrings that everyone else got caught up on. Miss Marple never thought she needed to reason a motive for the medium to destroy her inheritance, she just remembered how the family might make an opportunity for themselves.

Art can do one of two things. It can either reflect and reinforce the values of society, or it can be at odds with them. The latter form does not have to take a revolutionary form, it often does, but extreme reactionaries are often just as much at odds with societal values as the most committed revolutionist. Sherlock Holmes as an example, reflects and reinforces the societal values it was written under. They are the detective stories of the Industrial era. The detective is a computer, a crime-solving machine, and he does it all in the smoggy streets of modern, industrial London. Occasionally he undertakes an excursion to the countryside, which is treated as an almost exotic and backwards place, full of man-eating dogs and dying aristocrats. Miss Marple is of the different variety of art, she is at odds with her time, and it is this that gives her stories and her methods their importance. Miss Marple is not a machine, she is a person, and her reasoning is undoubtedly that of a person, in the complex and non mathematical way and even

the non rational way that only people (even today) can think. She is almost a throwback to another time, one before industrialism had overrun the planet, when people still lived in small countryside villages, and their only experiences with people were of their neighbors. She reflects an idealized past, the type that William Morris liked to write about, when people were really people, and this is the importance of these stories. Miss Marple is an oddity, a relic in the world of today, but I think it's important to note that Miss Marple's younger friends, (her nephews and various police officers) always doubt and make fun of her, only to end up being proven wrong by the old lady time and time again.

- Alex Martin