OLYMPIADS SCHOOL/GRADE 9 ENGLISH/HANDOUT 14

COMPARING AND CONTRASTING SELECTIONS FROM AGATHA CHRISTIE'S *MURDER ON THE ORIENT EXPRESS* AND THE 1974 MOVIE ADAPTATION

For this in-class writing activity, we will compare/contrast the first five chapters of *Murder on the Orient Express* and the first fifteen to twenty minutes of the 1974 movie adaptation.

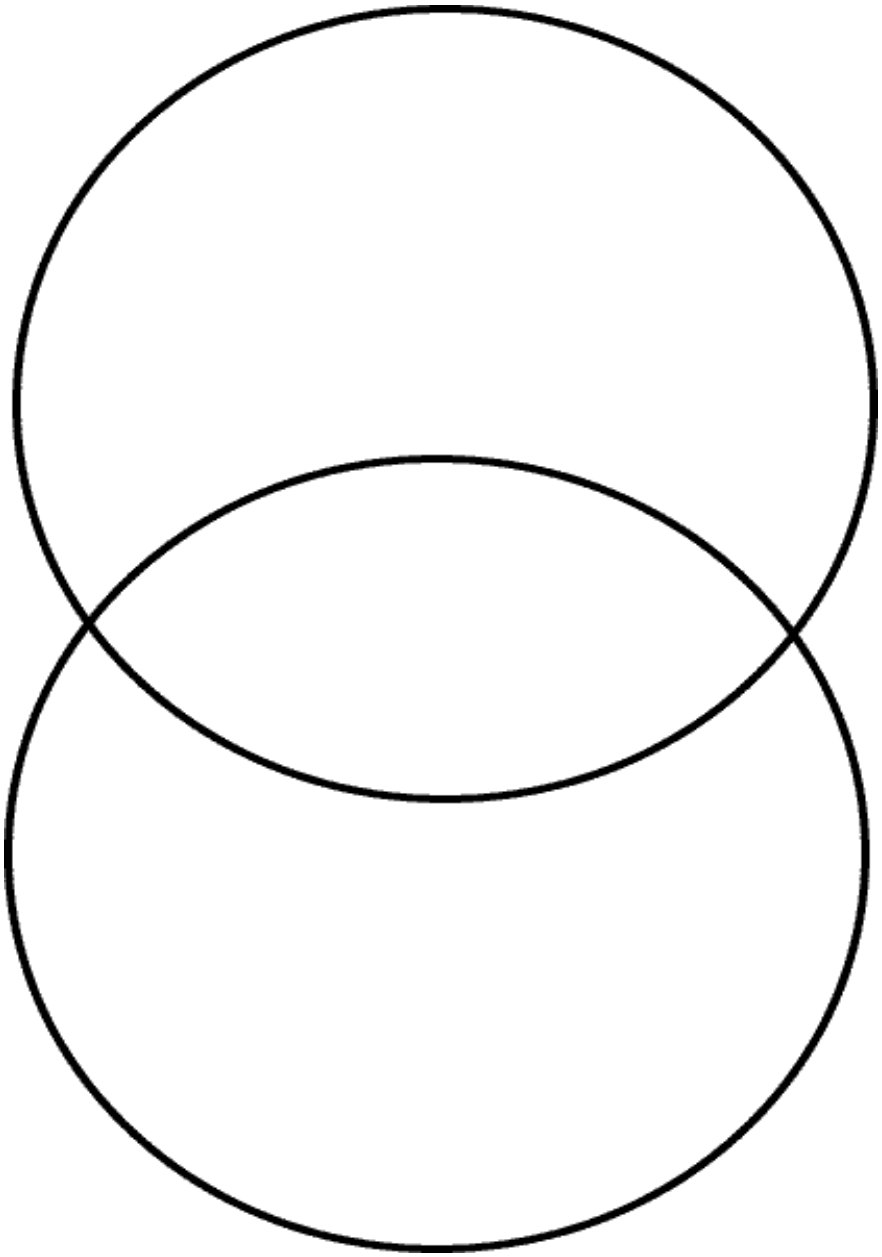
Use the following structures to help you (or your group) summarize the first five chapters of the novel.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter	Summarize (5Ws and 1H)	How does Christie's writing create suspense?
1		
2		
3		
4		

5		

Now watch the first fifteen to twenty minutes of the movie adaptation. After watching it, use the Venn diagram to organize your ideas. Rotate the page before using it.



Writing Instructions

- Write one paragraph that contains about ten sentences. (Your teacher may distribute large pieces of paper for smaller groups, to work on the paragraph collaboratively.)
- There should be a topic sentence that states your point of view about the critical difference. The topic sentence is usually at the beginning of the paragraph.
- Don't just state the difference. Explain the significance of the difference. Use sentences like, "One important difference/similarity...", "It is significant that the movie director...because...", "The adaptation reinforced my understanding / enhanced my enjoyment of the novel because..."
- Be sure to discuss evidence/examples from both the novel and the movie.
- Weave in a quotation from the novel/movie – an important, well chosen phrase from the novel will suffice. Do not "drop" quotations – weave/embed/integrate them into your analysis. Avoid block quotations.

Example of a "dropped quotation" that you should avoid writing:

The text said, "It had then filled me with a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul and allowed it to soar from the obscure world to light and joy." This means that nature allows Frankenstein to escape from depression.

Example of an embedded quotation that you are encouraged to write:

As the sight of nature fills Frankenstein with "a sublime ecstasy that gave wings to the soul," he is able to escape from his depression.

- Avoid phrases like, "The text said," or "He/she quotes that..." (Texts can't "speak" and characters don't "quote.")
- Try to maintain the present tense.
- There should be an insightful discussion of the evidence.
- Conclude with a clincher sentence that rephrases the topic sentence.
- Citations are necessary.
- Focus on ONE similarity OR ONE difference.

Your paragraph:

Read a discussion about Golden Age Crime Fiction, focusing on the historical context around Agatha Christie's life and work.

Web resource: https://eltalpykla.vdu.lt/bitstream/handle/1/225/ISBN9789955126980.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y

5. GOLDEN AGE CRIME FICTION: ITS HISTORY AND CHARACTERISTICS

The term "**Golden Age crime fiction**" was first used to suggest that the detective crime novels written between the two world wars and shortly afterwards marked a high point in the history of 20th century crime fiction writing. Critics no longer agree with this evaluation, as a great deal of excellent crime fiction has been written since then. However, the term is still used by literary historians and critics to conveniently refer to a particular sub-genre of crime fiction. An alternative term is the '**clue-puzzle**" novel, which indicates one of the central characteristics of this kind of writing.

Golden Age crime fiction takes a number of its features from the Sherlock Holmes stories, but it favours the novel form so that the plots are more complex, often involving more than one crime (now almost always murder), a large number of characters, many of whom are suspects, and a more detailed description of the social structure and geography of the place where the crimes occur. Still, there are many similarities to the formula that Conan Doyle developed. From a narrative point of view, the most important is that these are usually stories told not from the point of view of the detective, but of the detective's friend or assistant.

For example, the most famous of the Golden Age writers, Agatha Christie (1890-1976) gave her detective Hercule Poirot in her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), a faithful friend, Captain Hastings, who, like Dr Watson, is not very intelligent but who accompanies Poirot during the investigation: he is the first-person narrator in the novels in which he appears. Like Sherlock Holmes, Poirot is also an eccentric character, scornful of the police. However, he does not think much of detectives like Holmes who run about investigating a crime scene or disguise themselves to get information. Instead, he insists

on the importance of quietly letting his 'little grey cells' work. He is also pedantically tidy, and strikes the English as comic because of the size of his moustaches and his accented language. Still, he is brilliantly intelligent and always solves all the mysteries. In terms of plot, the same basic structure used by Conan Doyle is followed by Christie: a mysterious crime is committed, the detective investigates it, certain people appear as suspects, and finally the detective explains everything and indicates the criminal, who is then arrested. However, since Christie primarily wrote a much longer form, the novel, her works usually include a second crime or even several murders, introducing a mood of suspense, as the detective struggles to solve the case before the murderer strikes again.

Crime fiction became extremely popular during the interwar period and has never lost its popularity since. There is an enormous variety of eccentric detectives produced in this period, from the aristocratic Lord Peter Wimsey created by Dorothy Sayers (1893-1957), who sings beautifully, is always quoting literature and collects old books, yet is also an extremely fine cricket player, to Nero Wolfe, the very fat detective who almost never leaves his expensive New York apartment where he grows rare flowers, but sends out his handsome and athletic assistant Archie to collect information and bring suspects to his office. Nero Wolfe was created by Rex Stout (1886-1975), but most Golden Age crime fiction in the interwar period was produced by British writers. In the interwar period, the detective is almost never a member of the police force and, indeed, the police are often treated as unimaginative men who come to simple and hasty conclusions about who the murderer is. The Golden Age detectives show themselves to be superior to the official forces that are supposed to deal with crime.

The major name in this period is that of Agatha Christie, who, like many of these writers, continued to produce her detective novels after World War II with great success. Indeed, although other Golden Age writers are still read today, Christie is the only one who has become a household name like Conan Doyle, with her works translated into most world languages and still selling very well. Although some critics of crime fiction do not treat Christie with great respect, the fact remains that she was not only a very clever producer of clue-puzzle novels, but also a writer who had a broad interest in English society and the changes that took place in it from the 1920s to the 1960s. Moreover, though Christie was definitely a product of her social class and times, she was more tolerant of social change than many of her fellow Golden Age writers. Almost all of them were well-educated middle class people who tended, like Dorothy Sayers or Margery Allingham, to create detectives belonging to the aristocracy who have distinct class prejudices and rather irritatingly spend a good deal of time showing off their knowledge of fine wines and art, making references to works of literature not likely to be known by the masses, and classifying people by their accents and class origins. This material has dated badly, limiting their appeal to later generations.

Agatha Christie's more tolerant views may seem surprising considering that her background is in many ways typical of women who became successful writers in the popular and literary genres in the first half of the 20th century. By this time women had long distinguished themselves both as writers in popular genres (Gothic, romance, sensational novels, literature for children and the like) and as authors of poems and novels that were taken seriously as high literature. However, the majority of women writers still tended to work in the popular genres, in part because these were freer of the male-controlled values associated with canonical literature, but more because these genres

required less formal education than other kinds of literature. For several centuries in Britain, it was mainly only upper and middle-class boys who were given the traditional education in Latin and Greek which allowed them to produce the kind of literature that was built on these language traditions. Women, on the other hand, were either educated at home or might even be largely self-educated, reading books in English that were available. If they did have lessons in languages, these were modern languages like Italian, French and German. If they did attend schools for girls, these were very much concerned with producing young ladies with proper manners who could dance, sing and play a musical instrument a little, and know a few basic geographical and historical facts.

Still, the limitations put on women gave them freedom from the stereotyped classical genres that men of their class were educated in. Among 19th century women writers, ones like Mary Wollstonecraft Shelley (1797-1851) and Charlotte and Emily Bronte produced new genre traditions with their novels *Frankenstein* (1818) and *Jane Eyre* (1847) and *Wuthering Heights* (1847)., while the best-selling **sensational novel** genre was, a predecessor to detective fiction, was almost entirely in the hands of women writers like Mary Elizabeth Braddon (1835-1915).

Agatha Christie (1890-1976) was born and grew up in an upper middle class family that saw no reason to send a girl to school, but expected her to pick up some cultural knowledge by reading. Her future life was expected to be that of any young lady – to be married to a man of her own class, to be supported by him in comfort financially, to have children and run a household with several servants, to attend and hold parties for friends and relatives. It should have been a pleasant life in large country houses with frequent visits to London and Paris and holidays in the Riviera or the Near East (biographical details from Wagoner, 1-11).

As a child Christie took naturally to story-telling, living often without any other children around and so amusing herself by inventing characters and stories. Her father's death while she was only eleven left the family in a much tighter economic condition, but still when she went to Paris to what was known as a finishing school, one where girls improved their manners, dancing, French and other subjects to make them attractive marriage partners. In those days a young lady formally indicated that she was available for marriage by being a debutante and attending many fancy balls and parties in London. This was too expensive for her family, so instead Christie was sent to Cairo, then a British colony, for a season of excursions and parties there. Back in England, she went for month-long stays at the country houses of wealthy relatives and friends of the family, all this designed to introduce her to as many suitable young men as possible.

From this socializing Christie picked up a good deal of information about certain classes in England: the landed gentry, country house people, many of them rich and socially prominent, and the more humble lower middle class in country villages. In all her crime fiction class and money are extremely important, and Christie's characters are sharply defined by their use of language, choice of clothes and social mannerisms. Moreover, she began to understand how status worked and how power was obtained and maintained by certain people within a small community like an English village.

At first it seemed that Agatha Christie's life would go according to the program set for her by gender and class. She had started writing and publishing as a teenager, but this was simply poems and stories. When World War I broke out, like many young women, she took

a volunteer job as a nurse. She also married very quickly, as was typical during the war, a young pilot. She wrote her first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, using her experience as a nurse, in part because of a bet she made with her sister that she could write a clue-puzzle novel. The novel introduced the detective Hercule Poirot. It was successful, but the publishers paid Christie only 25 pounds, a ridiculously small sum even at the time. However, she went on writing detective stories and soon had a major reputation and was making a good deal of money. This was soon necessary since her husband did not turn out to be very practical. In 1926, when the reading public was buying her bestseller, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, an especially tricky example of the clue-puzzle novel in which the narrator, the detective's helper, turns out to be the murderer, Christie's own life took a very bad turn. Her husband suddenly announced that he wanted a divorce to marry another woman. She was left to raise her daughter and manage her own life, which she did very successfully. If anything, the emotional pain she felt made the crime fiction of her middle and later years psychologically deeper. Her personal story had a happy ending, as some years after her divorce, she married a young archaeologist, Max Mallowen, with whom she enjoyed an excellent relationship and who was very supportive of her career.

Christie, despite her enormous success and public fame, remained a modest person all her life. She took very calmly all the awards she received, including titles from the queen so that she became Dame Agatha Christie. In the public media, she was the "Queen of Crime" against whom many later writers would be measured. Yet, as Earl F. Bargainnier notes in one of the better book-length studies of her work she always insisted that she was "lowbrow" (a synonym for what is now called popular culture) and even made disparaging remarks about her writing, such as calling herself a "tradesman" and a "sausage machine". When she was asked what she hoped future literary cultural historians would say about her, her answer was typically modest: "Well, I would like it to be said that I was a good writer of detective and thriller stories" (all cited from Bargainnier 200). The way she puts this reminds us that not all her novels were Golden Age clue-puzzles: she wrote throughout her career some detective fiction that is more suspense thriller, some with strong romance elements, and even some with supernatural features. However, it is as the creator of classical Golden Age detective fiction that she remains best known.

Aside from her general brilliance as a writer, Agatha Christie did take a major step in making a gender change in the formula of the classical Golden Age detective novel. There had been women detectives before her novels, but none had been especially popular. When women do appear in the Sherlock Holmes stories, they play very minor roles, most often as victims or clients seeking aid; very occasionally they may be criminals. On the whole, the genre was widely considered to be a man's genre, especially in the form that stressed careful reasoning on the part of readers to solve the mystery. In 1893, when Bernard Shaw wanted to give a young woman in his play *Mrs. Warren's Profession* characteristics that were generally associated with stereotypical masculinity, he had Vivie tell a shocked gentleman: "I like working and being paid for it. When I'm tired of working, I like a comfortable chair, a cigar, a little whisky, and a novel with a good detective story in it" (Shaw 1765). Even though so many Golden Age writers were women, they still chose to create male detectives and a man-centred world.

It was in 1930 that Christie introduced what was to be her most famous female detective, Miss Jane Marple, in *The Murder at the Vicarage*. Miss Marple appears as one of the elderly spinsters in the charming English village of St Mary Mead where ,very

unexpectedly, murder takes place. Although most people find Miss Marple an irritatingly observant gossip, and some make fun of her as a woman who has never had much experience of the wider world outside of St. Mary Mead, she herself has quite a different opinion, believing, rightly, as it turns out, that her life-long experience of studying people's behavior and solving the mysteries of a small community provides the basis for being an excellent detective. With Miss Marple, Agatha Christie does much to redeem the image of the elderly unmarried lady as silly, weak and lacking any talents that the world needs. She has explained that she finds Miss Marple very enjoyable to write about and that the character herself is based on features of her grandmother and other elderly women relatives, who were very astute observers of human behavior; though personally well-behaved and decorous,they tended to expect the worst of those around them – and so were not shocked by any misbehavior, even murder.

It is interesting to note that, unlike her fellow Golden Age crime writers, who made their detectives men of status and wealth with solid positions within their societies, Christie's two most important detectives, Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, are both marginal to British society, both middle class, to be sure, but often treated with disrespect by those who first meet them. Poirot seems a comic figure with his polished moustaches and imperfect English, and is also a short man who could certainly not protect himself against violence. Miss Marple is neither rich nor beautiful nor wealthy nor married to a man of high position, so that in the England of her day, she is treated by many as a figure of fun, or at least someone who can safely be disregarded. Both seem intended to play the role of victims, not of detective heroes. In this way, without being a radical feminist, Agatha Christie creates figures who embody many of the stereotypical qualities associated with femininity, and then shows that they are superior in intellect to those who make fun of them.

In more recent years, as popular culture in general is being taken more seriously by academic critics, work on Agatha Christie's novels and others of their kind are being analysed beyond surface qualities of characterization, plot and setting. One such critic is Heta Pyrhonen, who in *Mayhem and Murder: Narrative and Moral Problems in the Detective Story* (l999), examines both the ideology of crime fiction and the complex relationship of detective and reader. She writes that "much of the complexity in moral evaluation in detective stories arises from the difference between two sets of criteria: the judicial and the moral codes […] because criminal investigation shows guilt to be a more universal phenomenon than crime" (Pyrhonem 18). Good crime fiction reveals that many people have secret lives and bear guilt for earlier actions, although only a very small number of them actually commit crimes. Therefore, though religious notions of sin rarely are mentioned in crime fiction, they exist between the lines, as it were.

In addition, moral evaluation becomes more important in Golden Age than in earlier kinds of crime fiction in part because of a greater interest in human psychology that became common in the early 20th century with the influence of psychologists like Sigmund Freud. Although Agatha Christie and most later detective novelists rely on a very popularized form of psychology, in this way being similar to crime cinema of the same period in the hands of masters like Alfred Hitchcock, still motivation becomes one of the major clues in solving a crime. In a Christie narrative, each character is presented not only by appearance and mannerisms, but often with psychological analysis. Hercule Poirot short stories often begin with the detective thinking in this way about his new client. For example, in "The

Cretan Bull", a young lady comes to Poirot when her fiancé breaks off their engagement because he believes he suffers from a form of his family's insanity. The story opens in this way:

> *Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully at his visitor.*
>
> *He saw a pale face with a determined-looking chin, eyes that were more grey than blue, and hair that was of the real blue-black shade so seldom seen […] He noted the well-cut but also well-worn country tweeds, the shabby handbag, and the unconscious arrogance of manner that lay behind the girl's obvious nervousness. (Christie 520)*

"The Apples of the Hesperides" begins in a very similar fashion:

> *Hercule Poirot looked thoughtfully into the face of the man behind the big mahogany desk. He noted the generous brow, the mean mouth, the rapacious line of the jaw and the piercing visionary eyes. He understood from looking at the man why Emery Power had become the great financial force that he was.*
>
> *And his eyes falling to the long delicate hands, exquisitely shaped, that lay on the desk, he understood, too, why Emery Power had attained renown as a great collector. He was known on both sides of the Atlantic as a connoisseur of works of art. (Christie 587)*

All of Agatha Christie's detectives trust their ability to analyse people in this way. However, Miss Jane Marple also uses another method particular to herself. Because she has spent so many years of her life studying people in a small village and solving very minor puzzles about their actions, when she has to deal with a murder, she often relies on finding parallels to village life and village people. In the novel *They Do It with Mirrors* (1952), for example, Miss Marple struggles to understand the personality of one young man:

> *If only she could find in her memory the right parallel.*
>
> *Painstakingly she rejected the curious behavior of Mr. Selkirk's delivery van – the absent-minded postman – the gardener who worked on Whitmonday – and that very curious affair of the summer weight combinations. (Christie 54)*

In another novel, *4:50 from Paddington* (1957), Miss Marple comes up with village parallels for suspects in the current murder she is investigating and mentions these to a policeman she knows well:

> *"All one can do is to observe the people concerned, or who might have been concerned, and see of whom they remind you." […]*
>
> *Craddock smiled and said:*
>
> *"And Alfred?"*
>
> *"Jenkins at the garage," Miss Marple replied promptly. "He didn't exactly appropriate tools, but he used to exchange a broken or inferior jack for a good one." (Christie 137)*

In this way, analysis of the personalities and behaviour of suspects becomes just as important in clue-puzzle crime fiction as careful investigation of physical clues left by a murderer at the crime scene and meticulous calculations of schedules and distances. Indeed, in a Golden Age detective narrative, the physical clues and alibis provided by time and distance from the murder scene often turn out to have been cleverly faked to implicate another person, while psychological analysis indicates the true murderer.

YOUR INPUT 3: CREATIVE ACTIVITY

THE CRIME SITUATION IS THE FOLLOWING: BEFORE THE FINAL EXAMINATION IN A COURSE OF YOUR CHOICE, THE TEACHER IS FOUND DEAD IN THE WASHROOM. SHE HAS BEEN HIT OVER THE HEAD WITH A HEAVY HAMMER LEFT IN THE LOBBY BY WORKERS DOING RENOVATIONS. THIS TEACHER IS VERY STRICT ABOUT MARKS AND IS ALSO NOT VERY POPULAR WITH HER FELLOW TEACHERS.

BY YOURSELF OR IN GROUPS, CREATE A LIST OF SUSPECTS. GIVE EACH A NAME; DESCRIBE HIS OR HER APPEARANCE AND PERSONALITY AND OFFER MOTIVES FOR THE CRIME. INCLUDE TEACHERS, ADMINISTRATIVE STAFF AND STUDENTS IN YOUR LIST. THEN ARGUE WHICH ONE IS THE TRUE MURDERER.