A Critical Analysis of Agatha Christie

Countless critics have written about the works of Agatha Christie. They've dissected her plot structures, debated the merit of her style, argued about the benefits of her stories' settings and discussed the depths of her characters. In this essay, I will compare and contrast the opinions of these critics and relate them to my own in connection to my reading of *The A.B.C. Murders*, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, and *Curtain*.

Since Agatha Christie is a murder mystery writer, and every murder mystery has a few basic principles in common, there is no argument to the fact that Christie has a typical format for her plots. According to Gillian Gill, a former Harvard professor who specializes in modern fiction and feminist theory, Christie writes variations of two basic plots. In the first plot, the prime suspect—who is in fact the murderer—has an unshakable alibi. In the second, a number of people have motives for wanting to murder the victim and none have convincing alibis, so they are all likely suspects.[1] I have yet to read a Christie novel that exemplifies the second basic plot, but Gillian Gill concurs that a perfect example of the first basic plot is *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. In this book, Alfred Inglethorp, the young, newlywed husband of Emily Inglethorp, is the prime suspect in the murder of his rich, elderly wife. However, upon the initial investigation, he is proved to be the only person who could not have committed the crime.

According to Patricia Maida and Nicholas Spornick, both of whom are previous professors of English at the University of the District of Columbia, there are multiple common plots in Agatha Christie's novels. One of these, *The Frame-Up*, involves an elaborate scheme that directs the blame

[1] Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries* (New York: The Free Press, 1990), p. 137.

of the murder onto another, guiltless person.[2] This plot can be seen in *The A.B.C. Murders*, where Franklin Clarke, in order to divert attention off of himself after murdering his older brother, Sir Carmichael Clarke, creates a scheme by which he frames an innocent man as an alphabet serial killer. Interestingly, this scheme is so plausible and complex that Franklin Clarke even convinces Alexander Cust, the scapegoat, of his own guilt.

Patricia Maida and Nicholas Spornick believe that although Christie's puzzle-game plots vary greatly, they all share a handful of basic ingredients that are common to all games: "a goal (whodunit), a field or playing board (setting), players (murder, suspects, sleuth), devices used to reach goal (clues), barriers and handicaps (cover-up schemes including red herrings), and rules for fair play (conventions of the genre.)"[3] However, many critics agree that Agatha Christie often uses the conventions of the detective-story genre—from cliché situations to stereotypical characters—to play on the conditioned reflexes of and to deceive even the most well-seasoned readers. For example, in *Murder on the Orient Express*, Christie alters the traditional murder mystery formula of the basic triad of victim, murderer, and detective when twelve of the likely suspects are found to be involved in the murder of Samuel Ratchett. This manipulation of the readers' expectations—along with similar tricks she carried out such as the one in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where the narrator is revealed to be the murderer—caused Agatha Christie to be threatened with expulsion from The Detection Club, a club composed of the most elite British detective authors.[4] Apparently, all members of the The Detection Club had to take an oath to always abide by a set of mystery

[2] Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction* (Bowling Green: Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1982), p. 77.
[3] Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction*, p. 70.
[4] J. Madison Davis, "Playing by the Rules," *World Literature Today*, May 2015.

writing rules, and the author of these rules, club member Ronald Knox, claimed that Christie had somehow violated her oath.

Something interesting to note is Agatha Christie's dislike of violence, and the consequential lack of violence in her murder mystery plots. In Christie's own words: "I don't like messy deaths. Anyway, I'm more interested in peaceful people who die in their beds and no one knows why. I don't like violence."[5] Because the descriptions of murders in Christie's books avoid gory details, her stories focus instead on the "whodunit" aspect of the murders. Charles Osborne, a journalist and the only author that the Agatha Christie Estate has ever allowed to produce adapted works in her name, says it best when he writes that Agatha Christie makes murder cozy, appealing "not to the blood lust but to a civilized delight in the puzzle shared by readers of all social and intellectual classes."[6]

Although the plots of Agatha Christie's books can vary, they do contain some common themes. One prominent theme in Christie's books is the desire to acquire status and wealth as a motive for murder.[7] This theme can be found in *The A.B.C. Murders*, in which Franklin Clarke murders his older brother, Sir Carmichael Clarke, in order to ensure that he inherits his brother's estate. Match-making is also a persistent theme in Agatha Christie's work, "for no marriageable character gets off without finding the "right" mate."[8] This theme is exemplified in *Curtain*, in which Hastings' daughter, Judith, who originally appears to have absolutely no interest in men,

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[5] Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction*, p. 68.
[6] Charles Osborne, "Appearance and Disappearance," in *Agatha Christie*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), p. 113.
[7] Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction*, p. 19.
[8] Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction*, p. 23.

turns out to be in love with her Dr. Franklin. By the end of the book, the two are happily engaged to be married and planning their research trip to Africa. Another common theme in Christie's books, according to Gillian Gill, is that of sexual passion and physical attractiveness. "Men and women, young and old, will murder or risk murder in order to secure the sexual partner they desire or to exact sexual revenge."[9] This theme is can be seen in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, in which Alfred Inglethorp and Evelyn Howard, secret lovers who wish to secure their financial future, conspire to murder Emily Inglethorp in order to attain her fortune.

The debate of the presence of feminism or antifeminism in Agatha Christie's work is a prominent topic in most analyses of her characters. It is therefore important to note that Agatha Christie was not truly a feminist or an antifeminist. The complexity of her opinion can be captured in her very own words: "The position of women, over the years, has definitely changed for the worse…We have clamored to be allowed to work as men work…It seems sad that having established ourselves so cleverly as the "weaker sex," we should now be broadly on a par with the women of primitive tribes who toil in the fields all day."[10] In short, Agatha Christie believed that women are equal to men, but that they should be admired for manipulating men to think otherwise. She once said of her grandmother's friends, who had in her opinion so artfully established their frailty and delicacy to their husbands, "[They] seem to me in retrospect singularly resilient and almost invariably successful in getting their own way. They were tough, self-willed, and remarkably well read and well informed."[11]

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[9] Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, p. 56.
[10] Pam McAllister, "The Impact of Gender on Agatha and Her Craft," in *Agatha Christie*, ed. Harold Bloom (Philadelphia: Chelsea House Publishers, 2002), p. 81.
[11] Pam McAllister, *The Impact of Gender on Agatha and Her Craft*, in *Agatha Christie*, ed. Harold Bloom, p. 81.

Many critics believe that there is an undertone of feminism in Agatha Christie's work because there are so many powerful female characters in her stories. As Gillian Gill writes, "[Agatha Christie's world] is a world where women have a great deal of power, where they feel free to work to earn money, act in their interests, using trickery and violence if necessary, and to occupy any of the traditional male roles without fearing for their femininity."[12] On the other hand, some critics claim that Christie's novels are antagonistic towards career women.[13] These critics claim that Agatha Christie frequently implies that marriage and motherhood are every woman's true calling[14] and that women in Christie's stories who neglect familial values tend to encounter great sorrow. However, Merja Makinen, former Principal Lecturer in English Literary Studies at Middlesex University, argues that "Christie has a number of women, not large in number—given the novel count—but persistent in their presence, who exist happily outside of the traditional conventions of married domesticity, inhabiting the tabooed grounds beyond what was perceived as culturally acceptable familial norms."[15]

Marty S. Knepper, the Chair of the English Department at Morningside College, writes that Christie "often uses sexist stereotypes of women [and] sometimes shows women as inferior to and dependent on men."[16] Still, most critics agree that female characters in Agatha Christie's novels are often depicted as extremely strong-willed and spirited as opposed to their weak and passive male counterparts. According to Gillian Gill, "In a Christie novel, young men are often frivolous sex objects, and appreciated as such, while young women are the solid breadwinners. A woman

[12] Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, p. 63.
[13] Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), p. 81.
[14] Marty S. Knepper, "Agatha Christie: Feminist?" *The Armchair Detective*, Winter 1983.
[15] Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 93.
[16] Marty S. Knepper, "Agatha Christie: Feminist?"

over sixty can not only dominate the life of her family and community but also seek to promote her personal happiness through marriage to a much younger mate."[17] This statement can be clearly exemplified in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*. Emily Inglethorp, a wealthy, aged woman, is the authority figure of her family; she controls the wealth of her pathetically dependent stepsons, John and Lawrence Cavendish, and marries Alfred Inglethorp, a man who is more than twenty years her junior.

I agree with Gillian Gill, who writes that "talent, energy, and character are what count in the Christiean world, not gender."[18] A clear example of this can be found in the balance of female and male murderers in Christie's writing. This is especially significant because other murder mystery writers of the Golden Age wrote strictly about typical masculine criminals.[19]

Many critics agree that Agatha Christie forms two-dimensional characters who fail to develop throughout the books. They claim that the lack of emotion displayed in the stories creates distance between the reader and the characters, resulting in a lack of sympathy for the murder victim. Although this is true, I agree with Robert Barnard, a famous crime novelist and professor of English literature at the University of Tromsø, when he writes, "The interest in crime [that Agatha Christie] appeals to is not an emotional and sensational one; it is a *curiosity*—the desire to examine the available facts and reason through them to a convincing solution."[20]

When deliberately presenting an opposite point of view from his own, Robert Barnard calls Christie's characterization rudimentary in the extreme: "It is almost as if she had a pack of cards with a series of types baldly characterized, and before beginning a new book she shuffled and dealt

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[17] Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* p. 17.
[18] Gillian Gill, *Agatha Christie: The Woman and Her Mysteries*, p. 63.
[19] Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 135.
[20] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Company, 1980), p. 121.

herself ten or twelve to make up a cast-list of suspects."[21] Robert Dingley, on the other hand, finds that characters in Agatha Christie's books are meant to be "of interest not for themselves but only in relation to the crimes for which each may turn out to be responsible."[22] For that reason, the characters' lack of complexity and Christie's recycling of stereotypical suspects is completely irrelevant. In fact, when expressing his own opinion, Robert Barnard finds the advantage to Christie's bland characters. Noting that even her stereotypes aren't particularly vivid, he explains how having generic characters adds a universality to Agatha Christie's books; anyone—from the Norwegian teenager to the middle-aged matron—can take Christie's simple outline and fill it with details from his or her own experience.[23] I believe that Robert Barnard is correct when he states that this is the secret to Agatha Christie's worldwide success.

Although Robert Barnard believes that Agatha Christie alternates between two types settings for her stories—cozy and domestic and exotic or metropolitan[24]—most critics focus on the isolated country village that recurs in her plots. This village, which Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick believe to be modeled after Christie's hometown, Torquay,[25] is a setting that inspires a lot of controversy. While playing the devil's advocate to his own argument, Robert Barnard voices the opinion of many critics when he says, "Most of the books take place in an eternal fairyland disguised as an English village…Poverty, dirt and disease are dealt with in a throwaway subordinate clause…These villages are interchangeable, they are generalized and

[21] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 5.
[22] Robert Dingley, "Agatha Christie: Overview," in Twentieth-Century Young Adult Writers, ed. Laura Standley Berger (Detroit: St. James Press, 1994).
[23] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 117.
[24] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 25.
[25] Patricia D. Maida and Nicholas B. Spornick, *Murder She Wrote: A Study of Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction*, p. 16.

flat…We are in an eternal no-man's land."[26] However, when he later takes up his own opinion in the argument, Barnard points out the strength of universality that Christie's generalized settings bring to her books. "Her books are like a child's coloring-book, where the basic shape of the picture is provided, and the child fills in the details and decides on the colors himself."[27]

Robert Barnard also points out that Christie's world "is a world shut off from the political and social preoccupations of the day. It cares little about what happens in London, and Europe might not exist, for all it cares."[28] However, Earl F. Bargainnier, a former professor of English Language and Literature at Wesleyan College, adds that throughout her books, Agatha Christie unconsciously leaves a social history of the changes that occurred in fifty years of upper middleclass English life.[29] I believe that Robert Dingley puts it best when he writes that "[Christie's], in the end, is a comfortingly orderly world, where all loose ends can be tied into neat bows and in which, once the murderer has been identified, no further or lager problems remain to be resolved."[30]

Agatha Christie is not famous for her writing style; if anything, she is infamous for it. In fact, some critics suggest that Christie's writing is so appalling that it is a waste of paper to print her books.[31] These critics also believe that Christie's stories are class-bound and intellectually dead. According to Robert Barnard, "Her books are much analyzed by foreign linguists…but it is not easy to see why: perhaps she writes with such a simple vocabulary that even they can understand her."[32] However, I agree with Robert Dingley when he points out that "there is little

[26] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 6.
[27] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 117.
[28] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 27.
[29] Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity*, p. 6.
[30] Robert Dingley, "Agatha Christie: Overview"
[31] Edmund Wilson, "Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?" *The New Yorker*, January 1945.
[32] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 6.

purpose in berating oranges for not being bananas, and complaints that Christie is not George Eliot (or even, for that matter, Margery Allingham) seem so obviously true and so obviously beside the point as to be hardly worth making."[33]

There are clearly two opposing views taken up by the critics of Agatha Christie; some critics believe that she is a murder mystery mastermind, while others claim that she has an insipid writing style and that her books are filled with painful clichés. However, no critic can argue that "Christie's appeal (like Dickens's) is universal, cutting across every possible barrier of race, color, class and intelligence."[34] Agatha Christie revolutionized murder mystery writing; she brought the thrill of common crime into the home, capturing the attention of readers all around the world. I believe that Christie's books will live on forever, for the universality of her writing makes them timeless. Whether it be fifty or five hundred years from today, there will always be an eager audience for the brilliant stories of Agatha Christie.

[33] Robert Dingley, "Agatha Christie: Overview"
[34] Robert Barnard, *A Talent to Deceive: An Appreciation of Agatha Christie*, p. 4.

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