

# Agatha Christie: A Comparative Literary Study

Agatha Christie is one of the most renowned murder mystery writers of all time. Unlike some authors, who became famous only after their deaths, Christie grew increasingly famous throughout her writing career. Her novels were the guilty pleasures of crime fiction lovers all around the world, and the characters that she created — especially Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple — are remembered to this day as some of the greatest detectives in all of crime novel history. Agatha Christie was the pioneer of modern detective fiction. Unlike other mystery writers of her time, such as Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Christie did not include supernatural elements in her work. Instead, she wrote about realistic crimes that took place in modern, everyday life scenarios. Agatha Christie also revolutionized gender roles in detective fiction; she was the first author to create strong, significant female characters in her murder mysteries, something completely unimaginable at the time.

Although she wrote other books throughout her writing career, Agatha Christie primarily wrote murder mystery novels. These novels were set in many locations, from Paris and Belgium to Egypt and Turkey. However, the majority of Agatha's books took place in England, and all were set in the time frame in which they were written.

Since Agatha Christie wrote murder mysteries, there is a formulaic element to the structures of her plots. First, a murder occurs, and the detective is asked to solve the case. For example, in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the old mistress of a manor house in Essex, England, is poisoned and the private detective, Hercule Poirot, is called upon by an old friend to investigate the murder. Likewise, in *The A.B.C. Murders*, an old lady is murdered in Andover, England on June 21<sup>st</sup>, and Hercule Poirot is asked to help solve the

crime because he received an anonymous letter earlier that promised that an unsolvable mystery would occur in Andover on the twenty-first of the month. Dissimilarly, in *Curtain*, the detective, Hercule Poirot, discovers a man who has committed multiple murders, but who was never suspected of having committed the crimes. So, Poirot goes back to the Styles estate in order to catch the murderer at his next crime and find enough evidence to convict him. Unlike in Agatha Christie's other books, Poirot decides to catch this criminal of his own accord and already knows that there is a murderer present at Styles before a murder is committed in the story. Then, the detective takes time to examine all of the available evidence and observe all of the possible suspects. After a while, the detective finds that the information he has does not allow him to identify the murderer successfully, so a period of hopeless tension occurs. Discouraged, the detective decides to bide his time, retiring to think over all that he knows. Suddenly, the detective has an epiphany, but refuses to tell anyone about his idea until he manages to find satisfactory evidence to support his theory. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the last link in the chain of evidence is a set of three strips of paper: a torn letter in Alfred Inglethorp's own handwriting, which confirms not only his guilt, but also the guilt of his accomplice, Evelyn Howard. In *The A.B.C. Murders*, the final proof of Franklin Clarke's guilt is the discovery of his walking stick, which he used in the Churston and Andover murders, and the fact that his photograph was recognized by many of the witnesses of the Doncaster murder. In *Curtain*, on the other hand, there is no final piece of evidence to be found; Poirot already knows that Stephen Norton is the murderer, but he has absolutely no way to prove it. Finally, the detective gathers all of the characters and gives a long explanation of the events that occurred, ending with the identification of the murderer. In

the end, after the murderer is convicted, the detective clears up all of the loose ends that were not explained earlier. There are, of course, some minor variations to this formula. For example, in *The A.B.C. Murders*, multiple murders occur before Poirot is able to solve the crime, and at first they convict the wrong person. Then, in *Curtain*, Poirot murders the murderer instead of getting him arrested because without proof, Norton will never be convicted and will continue to murder innocent people. Also, Poirot's explanation of the events that have occurred, instead of being announced to the entire cast of characters as usual, is given to Hastings in the form of a detailed letter because by this time Poirot has passed away.

Agatha Christie wrote murder mysteries series, so she often had recurring characters in her work. For example, she wrote over thirty novels starring the detective Hercule Poirot, who was occasionally accompanied by the narrator of some of these stories, Captain Hastings. The use of Captain Hastings, the common "idiot" who points out the obvious to the astute, yet occasionally too detail-oriented Hercule Poirot, plays on the famous detective duo of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson. Poirot once says to Hastings: "It is your destiny to stand beside me and prevent me from committing the unforgivable error...Overlooking the obvious!"<sup>1</sup> Hercule Poirot is a retired Belgian police officer that works as a private detective. With his long, black mustache and his comically egg-shaped head, Poirot is "a ridiculous-looking little man. The sort of little man one could never take seriously."<sup>2</sup> Contrarily, he is a solemn, brilliant, yet curiously eccentric character, whose satirical humor greatly enhances the

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<sup>1</sup> Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders* (New York: The Berkley Books, 1991), p. 4.

<sup>2</sup> Agatha Christie, *Murder on the Orient Express*, (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2011), p. 7.

suspenseful plots of Agatha Christie's books. Poirot, who has a great taste for clothing, once makes a comment to Hastings about a lady's lovely clothes. Hastings laughingly replies that he himself never notices what people have on, to which Poirot promptly retorts: "You should join a nudist colony."<sup>3</sup>

Many of the female characters in Agatha Christie's work are independent, determined women. For example, in *The A.B.C. Murders*, Mrs. Asher is a respectable, hard-working woman, who, despite her old age, manages to support not only herself, but also her drunkard of an ex-husband. When Poirot questions why Mrs. Asher has never tried to free herself legally from the continued persecution of Franz Asher, Mary Drower replies: "Well, you see, he was her husband, sir, you couldn't get away from that."<sup>4</sup> A strong female character can also be seen in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, where Agatha Christie idealizes the independent Mary Cavendish — whom Poirot describes as a proud, resolute, and determined woman — by showing Hastings' infatuation with both her beauty and her character. Another example can be found in *Curtain*, where Hastings' daughter, Judith, is an extremely assiduous and independent young lady who appears to have no interest in men because she is so consumed by her work. This bothers the traditional Hastings, who says: "It worries me sometimes...After all, youth is the time to have one's fling — not to sit pouring over test tubes. It isn't natural."<sup>5</sup>

It is interesting to note that Agatha Christie herself was a determined, independent woman who had to work in order to help her first husband keep them financially stable. Agatha valued the sense of equality that contributing to their fortune gave her, despite the

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<sup>3</sup> Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders*, p. 126.

<sup>4</sup> Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders*, p. 25.

<sup>5</sup> Agatha Christie, *Curtain* (New York: Pocket Books, 1976), p. 98.

fact that it was not conventional for a woman of her social rank to do so at the time. In fact, Agatha continually poked at this socioeconomic ideal in her writings, such as with Hastings' comment in *Curtain* that he finds it unnatural for Judith to focus so much on her work. Agatha, herself, went through a struggle similar to Judith's during the First World War. In fact, Agatha's husband managed to stop her from continuing to volunteer as a nurse in the war effort because he thought it to be a filthy job and hated to think of her doing it. Also, the notion presented by Mary Drower in *The A.B.C. Murders* could be Agatha's way of drawing attention to certain religious values. The idea that "your husband is your husband and you can't get away from that" was a common belief at the time, so it must have been quite difficult for Agatha herself when she divorced her first husband, being a member of the Christian church.

The plots of Agatha Christie's mysteries all vary, but they do contain some common themes. A common theme in her stories is financially motivated murder. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, Alfred Inglethorp and Evelyn Howard poison Emily Inglethorp for her fortune. As Poirot explains in the end: "They arranged their infamous plot — that he should marry this rich, but rather foolish old lady, induce her to make a will leaving her money to him, and then gain their ends by a very cleverly conceived crime."<sup>6</sup> Similarly, in *The A.B.C. Murders*, Franklin Clarke creates a serial killer identity and frames an innocent man just so that he can kill his wealthy brother, Carmichael, and inherit his fortune without being suspected of murder. In *Curtain*, on the other hand, Agatha Christie depicts a very different kind of motive for murder — a psychological

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<sup>6</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (New York: Barnes and Noble, Inc., 2009), p. 173.

one. Stephen Norton has an inferiority complex that develops into a hobby of influencing other people in such a way that they are inspired to commit murder; all the while without their realizing that he has manipulated them. This hobby then becomes an addiction. As Poirot explains it to Captain Hastings: “His hobby grows until it becomes a passion, a necessity! It was a drug, Hastings —a drug that induced craving as surely as opium or cocaine might have done.”<sup>7</sup>

Another prominent theme in Agatha Christie’s books is the devastation wrought by age. It is interesting to note that this was an important theme in Agatha’s own life. She was considered a very attractive young woman and, as she aged, her first husband made her feel horrible about her fading beauty. In fact, Archie Christie cheated on her with a younger woman for that exact same reason. Even after her second marriage to a man who loved Agatha for exactly who she was, she continued to feel deep insecurities about the decline of her physical appearance over time. Perhaps subconsciously, Agatha Christie put references to her thoughts on the matter into her writing, usually through the musings of Captain Hastings. For example, in *The A.B.C. Murders*, when looking at the wedding photograph of Mrs. Asher, Hastings reflects: “There was no disguising the handsomeness of the girl in the picture...[and] this smart young man with the military bearing. I recalled the leering drunken old man, and the worn, toil-worn face of the dead woman — and I shivered a little at the remorselessness of time....”<sup>8</sup> This theme is also displayed in *Curtain*, where Agatha Christie takes many opportunities to describe the decrepitude of the frail, aged Poirot. In fact, in the very beginning of the book, Hastings notes: “Nothing

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<sup>7</sup> Agatha Christie, *Curtain*, p. 258.

<sup>8</sup> Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders*, p. 32.

is so sad, in my opinion, as the devastation wrought by age. My poor friend...He was a thin little man now. His face was lined and wrinkled.”<sup>9</sup>

Another interesting theme in Agatha Christie’s mysteries is that anyone, from an innocent child to a modest maid, can be a murderer. In fact, Hercule Poirot reminds Captain Hastings of this in *Curtain*, when he says: “Everyone is a potential murderer — in everyone there arises from time to time the *wish* to kill —thought not the *will* to kill.”<sup>10</sup> In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the murderer is the suspicious new husband, Alfred Inglethorp, but also the loyal old maid, Evelyn Howard, who, as everyone believes, “for all her gruff ways, wouldn’t be unkind to a fly.”<sup>11</sup> In *The A.B.C. Murders*, the murderer is the passionate Franklin Clarke, who appears as eager as anyone to help catch the serial killer that murdered his older brother. Contrarily, in *Curtain*, the murderer is the quite, unassuming Stephen Norton, who, underneath his placid exterior, is a ruthless psychopath. As Poirot describes: “Norton, the gentle-natured loving man, was a secret sadist. He was an addict of pain, of mental torture...[His hobby of secondhand murder] fed two lusts — the lust of the sadist and the lust of power. He, Norton, had the keys of life and of death.”<sup>12</sup>

According to the format that the mystery genre requires, Agatha Christie wrote in a concise, yet descriptive style. Since the joy of crime novel reading comes from analyzing all of the possible suspects, it is important to hear the voices of as many of the characters as possible throughout the story. Therefore, Agatha wrote primarily in the form of dialogue, which allows the readers to feel as if they are in the room attempting to

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<sup>9</sup> Agatha Christie, *Curtain*, p. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Agatha Christie, *Curtain*, p. 254.

<sup>11</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, p. 121.

<sup>12</sup> Agatha Christie, *Curtain*, p. 258.

identify the murderer along with the detective. Still, Christie did not repress her desire to paint a vivid picture with the descriptions and sentiments of the story's narrator. In *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which is set during the First World War, Hastings reflects: "As one looked out over the flat Essex country, lying so green and peaceful under the afternoon sun, it seemed almost impossible to believe that, not so very far away, a great war was running its appointed course. I felt I had suddenly strayed into another world."<sup>13</sup> Agatha's writing also has an underlying element of satire. Once, in *The A.B.C. Murders*, Hercule Poirot returns to his bedroom to find Hastings packing his clothes for their upcoming journey in a hurried, haphazard fashion. When Poirot expresses his concern for the ill-treatment of his clothing, Hastings cries: "Good heavens, Poirot, this is a matter of life and death. What does it matter what happens to our clothes?" Poirot then retorts: "You have no sense of proportions Hastings. We cannot catch a train earlier than the time that it leaves, and to ruin ones clothes will not be the least helpful in preventing a murder."<sup>14</sup>

The style and mood of Agatha Christie's writing developed over time. Her first book, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, is a rather straightforward mystery novel. It has a sweet, light-hearted simplicity to it, owing to Agatha's lack of experience in writing and her young age. She wrote *The A.B.C. Murders*, on the other hand, at a very different stage of her life. At this time, Agatha had found a new zest for life in the joys of living in the Middle East and the comfort of her recent second marriage; she was writing more than ever before. *The A.B.C. Murders* displays a greater complexity of plot and theme,

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<sup>13</sup> Agatha Christie, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, p. 3.

<sup>14</sup> Agatha Christie, *The A.B.C. Murders*, p. 88.



experimenting with the idea of a serial killer. Agatha also employed her creative license by narrating scenes at which neither Hercule Poirot nor Captain Hastings were present, giving the story an even more suspenseful quality. In *Curtain*, the last installment of the Hercule Poirot mystery series, Agatha Christie shows the greatest genius of all. She wrote *Curtain* during the Second World War, when she was separated from her husband and burying herself in her work to dull the pain. Agatha's experiences at the time affected the mood and style of the book; it has a more melancholy, reflective tone, and the story deals with stronger themes of death and loneliness. *Curtain* is definitely one of Agatha Christie's best works. It was written meticulously, including countless tiny details to lead the reader off of the murderer's scent, ending with a beautifully brilliant resolution that only the "Queen of Crime" could have devised.

Agatha Christie was the pioneer of modern detective fiction; she revolutionized murder mystery writing, finding the intrigue in ordinary life and common crime. In addition to her contribution to the genre of detective fiction, Agatha influenced the movement for gender equality through her work. She was an inspiration; an average English housewife who celebrated female independence and formed a new vision of what a woman could be. In short, Agatha Christie was a remarkable author whose brilliant stories will continue to live on as some of the best works in the history of murder mystery novels.

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