



CONCEALING OR STRATEGIC DECEPTION? AGATHA CHRISTIE'S WHODUNIT ROUNDTABLE

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Abstract: Christie's lack of emotive Crescendos helps to mask her casual droppings of crucial clues in the complex games she plays with readers. These obscure yet purposeful droppings of the clues never let everything out of the box, but are held in by the detective. However, the reader is engaged in being part of the 3 kinds of deductions in the novel- Reader, Narrator, and Detective. Agatha Christie's strategic placement comes into light to scrutinize the tiniest to the largest clues provided, catapulting all the accumulated stories surrounding the characters, resulting in the reader's helplessness in finding the true culprit, however, one can never downplay her dramatic 'RoundTable', the most perfect dramatic endings stage.

Keywords: Detective fiction, Whodunit, Narrative Surprise.

I. INTRODUCTION

Known as the Queen of Mysteries, Agatha Christie had been a dame for mystery enthusiasts, her bewildering talent lies in making the reader part of the confounded journey of this hermeneutical reading of the unsolvable patterns by the clues provided, just like how Poirot her all-knowing Belgium Detective puts it, the work of little grey cells. Christie's much-criticized simple and somewhat flat, though elegant and gently humorous, prose makes an equal fit for the atmosphere of English country life she describes. Christie uses her Grey Cells, her intelligence, to hide her shreds of evidence in plain sight and red herrings and concealment of truth, rather than the fabrication of lies (debatable at times) as a way to riddle her readers. Thus, this research will attempt to study, the distinctive features that Christie employs in her astounding narrative technique; how the underlaid obscure, yet purposeful giving up of the clues creates a sense of transparent illusion, to challenge the reader further in their attempt to find the culprit behind the mysteries; how the strategic placement of the characters comes under the interrogation of what is the correct testimony and which characters are leading up to the clash of prevalent red-herrings that are used to distract and hinder the reader, to get an unbiased reading of the novel, as these sub-plots most often than not help the detective to delete such names from his/her list of suspects. However, this also leads to the Three kinds of deductions taking place in the novel- Reader, undoubtedly encouraged in an open challenge by the playing of Human Psychology of trying to solve the puzzle, Narrator, governed by the goal of winning over the Detective and outwitting him/her, the Detective, who indulges the narrator in his quest, yet keeps his understanding to himself, all the clues are to be shared equally, which is quite uncommon in the genre of mystery thrillers, it is as of what Poirot calls, the study of the psychology of crime and methods, that is highlighted, which he inadvertently goes into details most often, describing in elongation the "Little Grey Cells", which later ends in the perfect dramatic ending at the roundtable, where every suspicious key is turned apart, and the reader, along with the narrator is rendered flabbergasted. Nevertheless, this essay attempts to examine, this undeniable element of narrative surprise through a qualitative research orientation of the derived and compiled data, proceeding with a comparative analysis of these distinctive features in 4 major distinguished novels of Agatha Christie, *Thirteen at Dinner*, *The Dumb Witness*, *The Murder*

in the *Orient Express* and the classic, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*. For space constraint, only a few instances are analyzed from the novels, additionally, the attempt had been made to limit the exploration to be curtailed to the concerned writer and the area-specific questions. Agatha Christie, in her perverse narrative style, creates a rupture from this conventional style of whodunit riddle writing, which has been a topic of contentious discourse for a long time, and this study will attempt to add through its findings another tangent to this colloquy.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In her comparison of the whodunit as a riddle in the essay “The Whodunit as Riddle: Block Elements in Agatha Christie”, Singer summarizes that “the writer is the authoritative source. The murderer is whomever the author, not the reader, chooses it be.” (Singer. 158) She affirms that such a satisfactory solution to a mystery, can only be acceptable as rationally loftier than the alternatives that are to be conceived by the reader, Roger Caillois comments on this rational aesthetic of mystery, “What the reader demands is that [someone] with believable human motives pull off a crime that seems to defy reason but that reason can eventually uncover.” (Caillois. 9) The most perceptible acknowledgement among critics and readers alike is the reading of whodunit is “an almost pure hermeneutic exercise in which bits of conflicting information are given the reader to enable him or her to arrive at solution through systematic analysis.” Centering the exemplar for the reader-oriented literary theory. In Kermode's words, "The narrative is ideally required to provide, by various enigmatic clues, all the evidence concerning the true character of [the murder] that the investigator and the reader require to reconstruct[it]." (Kermode. 180) Singer examines the frequently asked question of why Christie's murders are so difficult to solve, while the murder itself is straightforward, and thus answers that, it “lies in the reader's mistaken presumption that the mystery is complex and that the texts are hermeneutically structured to enable a reader to imitate the detective or alter-ego in sorting through clues to discover a pattern. Agatha Christie's hermeneutic, however, is a negating one, one that takes a relatively simple murder and through the reading process controverts the reader's reason.” For a better gratifying reading experience, Van Dine insists, "The reader must have an equal opportunity with the detective for solving the mystery. All clues must be plainly stated and described." (Van Dine. 189)¹ requiring that all the rules must be plainly given and explained. Another tactic that Singer highlights in Christie's narrative style is the opposite block element to the suggested by Van Dine, “too much information” (Singer. 161) Agatha Christie uses red-herring as her technique for too much information, straying the reader, narrator and the detective from the truth and the extraneous sub-plots renders it difficult to place all the facts together. Although, one way or another detective sees through them, however, there are some conventions always at play in this genre as suggested by Goldman in his essay “The Appeal of Mystery”, that an early apparent solution to the crime will be false, particularly if concluded so by the police; a missing person might turn up dead, especially if they have made it known that they might have some knowledge about the crime, obviously exempting the detective from the lot; the initially most obvious suspect would turn out be innocent that he or she has knowledge of the crime without revealing it; if something strikes the detective as not right, it will turn out to be a significant clue; the anything mentioned in passing without apparent reason, especially if mentioned more than once, will be a significant clue; an unidentifiable victim will be identified but will not be the obvious one; an undecipherable dying message will be deciphered and will be a significant clue; the culprit will be among the known suspects, although they will all claim that the culprit is an outsider; a vociferously feuding couple will really be cooperating; seemingly unrelated characters will turn out to be related, often by past events or obscure family ties; physical description will match moral character; an apparent intended victim who survives well be the culprit. “As in tonal music, these genre-specific literary conventions facilitate the reader's following and predicting overall structure while allowing for original variation. Giving readers a competitive edge in their interpretive games with detectives and authors.” (Goldman. 267)

III. 3.1 NARRATIVE SURPRISE AND THE EMPLOYMENT OF LITTLE GREY CELLS

Agatha Christie's success lies in her non-arbitrariness of most of her solutions. Contrary to the common practice of whodunit writers, which, as Haycraft points out, goes back to Poe, Agatha Christie's murderers are not "the least likely." (Haycraft. 9) Nor are they taken at random from the list of suspects. Rather, more often than not, “they are the most likely husbands, wives, lovers, relatives, or others with clear cut motives of gain or

vengeance-that is, murderers much like those in real life.” As Miss Marple explains in *The Moving Finger*, “Most crimes, you see, are so absurdly simple... Quite sane and straightforward-and quite understandable- of course, in an unpleasant way.” The answer lies in the relatively simple murder and it is only through the reading process that this controverts the reader's reason. Nevertheless, Christie's module of narrative unpredictability benumbs the readers, as the solution that is derived by them is overruled by the detective, in their deduction. Christie's works are filled with ample of such examples. As in *Lord Edgware Dies*, or better known as 'Thirteen at Dinner', Christie uses the analogy of presenting a riddle to Hastings by Poirot, "What is it that has two legs, feathers, and barks like a dog?", and after the correct answer provided by Hastings, he resorts to saying that he should be the one to solve the riddle Hastings should say, "But a chicken does not bark like a dog,' and I say, 'Ah! I just put that in to make it more difficult.' Supposing, Hastings, that there we have the explanation . . ." if taken out from the present discourse of this scene, this riddle throws light on how this play on words negates the reader's reasoning and makes them hyper-aware towards the heightened action of the novel. Yet, if considering the scene from which this riddle is taken out, actually undermines the simplicity of the clue that had been always available, thus Poirot's exclamation of how complicated he had made the riddle out to be, while Hastings not being the brightest of them both does. This is one of the most brilliantly plotted mysteries, which actually creates difficulties for not just its readers, but the detective as well. However, it is the mental capacity of the detective that wins over the narrator and the readers, by his capacity to revolt against the intelligence of the ordinary and place his findings in the pattern that as he reflects he wishes “to arrange” his “ideas with order and Method.” (*Lord Edgware Dies*. Chapter 4) This method of arrangement of patterns can be discerned in Christie's highly appraised work. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where surprise to all Dr. James Shepphard, the narrator of the novel turns out to be the murderer, however throughout the novel Poirot has the idea, as he calls his methods, that the beguiling-natured narrator is the suspect, though he follows his rules that “the detective never tells.” But the most inspiring of all is the narrator himself, who never gives himself away, even though he is the voice himself. As the narrator of the novel Dr. Shepphard has the faculty to omit whatever he deems fit, he refuses to give away more than what is required to blindfold the readers and his thrice strengthened position, procured through as a reader, doctor and the name Sheppard², making it reluctant for readers to question his feigned innocence, revealed post-reading.

3.2 STRATEGIC PLACEMENT OF CHARACTERS AND CLUES

With rarely ambiguous themes, the elements of character and settings are thoroughly defined, yet at times they are removed further by the inferences set by the narrator, and the police. These characters and clues, are loosely structured and tied around the same tangent that murderer finds coincidentally benefiting or innocently arranged to be enshrouded from the readers and the detective, one such agony is faced by Poirot on his trip on the orient express in *Murder in the Orient Express*, we clearly see the dilemma, somewhat similar to that of in the *Lord Edgware Dies*, Poirot though quite sure of his hypothesis, cannot move further without answering to the puzzle left behind, if even one question is left to be unanswered then the mystery remains, Dame Christie uses this psychological method on Poirot's character in her advantage to never sway away from what the actual clues are and how they are to be unraveled, whereas the character placement establishes itself as the mode of red-herrings, rather than the unwanted clues, it is the unsolicited testimonies of the characters that hinders the unveiling of the truth, such can be seen in the case of *The Dumb Witness*, though highly questionable yet easily assumed that Poirot knew all-along who the murderer was, yet we see these characters laying out actions and testimonies alike, to serve their own motives. Significantly, Poirot never fails to delude the reader and narrator alike from what he sees to be the truth and deceives through such cross-questioning of the suspects and witnesses, that we are never even made slightly aware of what he had concealed, his judgment.

3.3 WHODUNIT ROUND-TABLE

In almost all endings of her novels, we see the 'Roundtable', The perfect/dramatic ending stage, where each character of the involved red-herrings is present, in the quasi-meeting setting and the revelations happen and this is the moment where the arrogant deductions of the reader and the narrator are proven to be wrong and the little grey cells reveal the absolute truth. In each Poirot case, in the end, there will be a showdown between himself and the narrators, the unboxing of the whole case will commence, a stripping of the loosely identified clues, now

attached with the tangent of reason, idea and method. Poirot would re-enact or elucidate the events of the murder; he will explicate how the murderer realizes the whole murder and lastly, by dispelling the red-herrings, addressing the major clues, the detective presents a rational breakthrough. This roundtable often gives the chance to the culprit to take an easy way out, rather than defamation, choosing to die, than to face the world. With no ounce of guilt these culprits, understands their disposition, yet these characters have no remorse over what they've done, their actions in their own twisted materialistic way stand morally correct. Another generic blocker is the expectation that characters who are suspected by the police are automatically innocent. In Christie's first novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, the victim's husband Alfred Ingle-horp is under the heavy suspicion of the police until Poirot, with great show and effort, uncovers an alibi, which because of its scandalous nature, the suspect is revealed to be not-guilty and the real culprit is caught.

3.4 BREAKING AWAY FROM THE CONVENTIONS

Breaking away from the set of crime rules to obey, she breaks away from many of them in her novels like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, she experimented with the conventional strategy set down by the oath like "Ten Commandments" composed by Ronald Knox, she not just breaks one rule, but actually many of them through the years; and in *Roger Ackroyd* introduced the narrator, Dr. James Sheppard, a resident of the village who is revealed in the next-to-last chapter to be the murderer. In the last chapter, Sheppard leaves a suicide note explaining how he carried out his deceptions. Readers were astonished by the unconventional unreliable narrator, who had actually, "plunged into a careful narrative, embodying all the facts", majorly focusing on the "I had set down.", giving us his narrative, "as precisely as possible," and the particular choice of such phraseology that distances himself from the readers because of the fear of obliterating his façade, yet it is this incisive peculiar narrative that becomes his nemesis, when asked by Poirot how much time it might take for the stranger to reach the window of Ackroyd's study, and he gives the precise answer that it might just take five or less minutes to do so, and that's the kind of psychological play is what Poirot practices in his cross-questioning to not just to cross-check the facts, but also making the culprit make a seemingly innocent slip. Whereas, seemingly not reasonable question from the clues available, turns out to be of greater importance, one such incident arises, when Colonel Melrose, comments of the absurdity of the telephone call and the seemingly apparent unreasonableness of it, however Poirot directly disparages the comment and affirms gravely, "Be sure there was a reason." It leaves him to find the right pieces of puzzles from the heaps of hay surrounding the clues, with the fake ones. Another such unconventional plot is *The Murder on the Orient Express*, while the prevalent rules of the golden age, only permits a single murderer, yet Dame Christie shatters the whole convention by making not just two or three characters, but all twelve passengers of the train are co-conspirators. These characters assembled in the guise of being strangers and fabricated identities, chooses Poirot as the unaware witness, however they underestimate the peculiar moustache detective's rational prowess. The wounds on the body of the victim, made by twelve passengers, make all of them an accomplice in this crime, making every passenger guilty of the crime.

3.5 GOLDEN AGE DETECTIVE FICTION AND IT'S INFLUENCE

In his history of the detective story, *Bloody Murder: From the Detective Story to the Crime Novel*, the author Julian Symons heads two chapters devoted to the Golden Age as "the Twenties" and "the Thirties". This period is broadly regarded to have begun in 1913, marked with the publication of EC Bentley's novel, *Trent's Last Case*, because of its immense popularity and reception. However, this period lost its glory before the Second World War. Symons notes that Philip Van Doren Stern's article, "The Case of the Corpse in the Blind Alley" (1941) "could serve ... as an obituary for the Golden Age." Current writing influenced by the Golden Age style is often referred to as "cozy"³ mystery writing, as distinct from the "hardboiled"⁴ styles popular in the United States. Recent writers working in this style include Sarah Caudwell, Ruth Dudley Edwards, Peter Lovesey, and Simon Brett, whereas this age's influence is pretty prevalent in the "new traditionalists", or "new orthodox school" of writers in Japan, such as the representatives of "new traditionalists", Yukito Ayatsuji, Gosho Aoyama, Rintaro Norizuki and Taka Ashibe.

IV. CONCLUSION

Dame Christie in her works employs the elements of narrative surprise and purposeful concealment as a way of deceiving the reader, over an objectifying lying, it heightens and distills the tension between the characters, creating a sense of translucent illusion, such a concoction that even if all the modes are out in the open, they can never outwit the detective. In the game of interpretation and inferences, though the reader has the upper hand because the reader has the omnipresent view of the novel, it is the detective who is better suited to win, because of the play of his intelligence and the author's brilliantly placed narrative structure, which never lets the reader to venture to some point, she doesn't deem beneficial for the plot. Agatha Christie also breaks down the rulebook of the generic expectations of a detective novel, encouraging the new generation of writers to feel at liberty to use the genre they see fit. Christie uses narrative genius to create plots, where each clue, may not be required, but is important to create deviations through red herrings. Through his study of psychology Poirot establishes a new set of investigations, solely based on the functions of intelligence, rather than the physical labor of finding the clues, the only chase that often calm, Poirot does give, in extreme haste to outrun the murderer, before letting them commit another one, or the sudden enlightenment of an idea, which helps in a sudden revelation of an idea concerning the hypothesis, however disparate and incoherent these might sound, but they must be assembled and arranged through method, leading up to a systematically obstructed revelation.

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