



The Detectives in Agatha Christie's Novels

Xiang Xu

College of Foreign Language

Qingdao University of Science and Technology

Qingdao 266061, China

E-mail: stephenxu10@163.com

Abstract

This paper puts a stress on Agatha Christie's detectives. Although they are different from sex to deductive method, there are also some patterns need resolving. Through the comparison, the variation of the author's creation could also be traced.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple

1. Introduction

Agatha Christie's detective novels are undoubtedly popular even nowadays. However, the more popular parts in her stories seems those detectives. The detective himself (herself frequently now), as the central character of this genre, is the most important and original element. It is difficult to describe his exact literary status, for he has no counterpart in any other fictional genre. He is the most outstanding character of the story, the constructor of the plot, the supplier of the clues, and the eventual solver of the mystery. The life of the book lies in him. The protagonist of a good detective novel is usually a character of attractiveness and of fascinating achievements. A great detective should be an unusual, colorful and gifted man.

2. Hercule Poirot

Christie's most popular detective is Hercule Poirot. He came out in her first novel *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*, which was published in 1920. Later he reappeared in thirty-three novels and sixty-five detective stories. In her autobiography, with regard to the period of time when she was thinking what her detective should be like. Christie writes:

Why not make my detective a Belgian? I thought. There were all types of refugees. How about a refugee police officer. Not too young a one. What a mistake I have made there. The result is that my fictional detective must really be over a hundred by now. Anyway, I settled on a Belgian detective. I allowed him slowly to grow into his part. He should have been an inspector, so that he would have certain knowledge of crime. He would be meticulous, very tidy, I thought myself as I cleared away a good many untidy odds and ends in my bedroom. A tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things square instead of round. And he should be very brainy - he should have little gray cells of the mind - that was a good phrase: I must remember that - yes, he would have little grey cells. He would have rather a grand name - one of those names that Sherlock Holmes and his family had. Who was it his brother had been? Mycroft Holmes. How about calling my little man Hercules? He would be a small man - Hercules: a good name. His last name was more difficult. I don't know why I settled on the name Poirot, whether it just came into my head or whether I saw it in some newspaper or written on something - anyway it came. It went well not with Hercules but Hercule - Hercule Poirot. That was all right - settled, thank goodness.

That is how Poirot has come into being and acquires his name and his main features in appearance. Hastings' description of him when he first appears in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* may help us know him better.

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound.

Hercule Poirot is thus born into Christie's novels. Anyone could not help liking such a tidy and interesting little man in real life. However, as a detective, he is a solitary. In spite of his long service with the Belgian police force one never

gets a sense of him as man with a past. He exists only in the present, his ability of solving crimes is much more important than his character. He is a middle-class figure, single and childless. Nevertheless, he also has companion of a sort. Poirot in the early years has Hastings, as Holmes has Watson. But real warmth of friendship does not exist in both pairs of partners. Moreover, several books later, Christie abandons Hastings for just reasons.

From the Dupin stories, we have the model that the eccentric and brilliant private detective has his doings chronicled by an admiring and thickheaded friend. The “Sherlock Holmes—Doctor Watson” pattern is just derived from Dupin and his unnamed chronicler. It is not surprising that his model is used by lots of other writers, for it is obviously very convenient for the writer. First, the admiring sidekick may utter expressions of compliment which would be unsuitable in the mouth of the author. Again, the reader, even if he is not as perceiving as the author, is usually a little cleverer than Watson. Sometimes he even pierces the cloud of mystification in which the detective is still lost himself. He will say to himself “Aha! The average reader is supposed to see no further than Watson. But the author has underestimated me.” He is deceived then. It’s all a device of the writer’s for flattering the reader and putting him on good terms with the writer himself. The third advantage of the Holmes-Watson is that by describing the clues as presented to the bemused mind of Watson, the author is enabled to preserve a false appearance of frankness. While at the same time he keeps to himself the special knowledge on which the right interpretation of those clues depends.

Christie also makes use of the Poirot—Hastings pattern in her first few novels, but she sends Hastings to Argentina later. This is a proof of how well Christie understands the demands of her story-telling craft. The drawbacks of the Poirot-Hastings partnership have already shown themselves. There is no room for growth in this relationship. Christie can only repeat Hastings’ bluntness, his superficial judgment of people and his inevitable mistakes. This limits the openness of the cases and blocks the free communication between the author and her reader. On the other side she had to repeatedly describe Poirot’s amused superiority, his commanding treatment of Hastings, which can easily become dull and unpleasing.

Furthermore, Hastings does not perform his functions well as storyteller, and as the public chronicler of Poirot’s famous victories. Maybe in character, there is something in common between Conan Doyle and Dr. Watson. Yet there is no such similarity between Agatha Christie and Hastings. And the Watson figure as narrator has a real advantage, which may be a reason in Conan Doyle’s awardness with the longer form. Watson can only narrate a case from the moment it becomes a case, that is, from the time it is brought to the Great Detective’s notice. Now the typical form of a Christie novel has a considerable leading part to the murder, and its form corresponds well to the average reader’s demands of a detective story. Generally the reader wants to know more about setting, the surrounding circumstances, and the characters who will be suspects. And above all, the reader wants to become interested in the corpse before it comes a corpse. With a Watsonian narrator this can only be done by resorting to one another temporary narrator, which often destroy the unity of the novel.

There is also another evident reason for Hastings’ being abandoned by his creator. He has no real use in the main business of a detective story investigation, Watson is around for the strong arm stuff which Conan Doyle enjoys but Christie dislikes. Thus Hastings has to go. In his place, Christie uses Poirot’s valet, George, or his secretary, Miss Lemon, to represent unimelligent common people. But after 1937, with the only exception of *Curtain*, Poirot is allowed to be what in essence he always has been: a solitary.

Though easy to become irritated at times, Poirot has justly earned his place as the best-known detective in twentieth-century crime fiction. His fame may firstly rest on his little grey cells, his unique method and style, his egotism which thrives from his confidence and sense of male superiority, though he frequently boasts of being able to solve crimes by sitting back and thinking, he is in fact extremely resourceful. On the one hand he can frequently be fondly engaged in activities of a Holmesian kind—examining the grease spot on the carpet of a fragment of torn fabric, remarking on the disarrangement or ornaments on the mantelpiece or a chair pulled slightly out. On the other, some of his best cases are indeed super examples of “thinking through”—notably *Cards on the Table* and *Death on the Nile*. These various imaginative methods capture the reader’s interest successfully. And he continually relies on his little grey cells to help him focus on the weakness that will lead a person to murder. Above all, his orderly habit of thought and his passion for order around him seem to have simulated Christie novels, Poirot is more convincing reasoner than any of the fictional detective of his period.

3. Miss Marple

However, a great many of Christie fans prefer Miss Marple as a detective to Hercule Poirot. That is because Miss Marple really has her own charm. Miss Marple was born in a small village St. Mary Mead really at the age of sixty-five to seventy. Together with her was also her nephew Raymond West, a modern novelist. Miss Marple first showed herself in *The Murder at the Vicarage* in 1930. After that she investigates in twelve novels and twenty short stories all together. In appearance, Miss Marple is a tall thin woman with a pink, wrinkled face, pale blue eyes and snowy white hair which she piles upon her head in an old-fashioned manner. Her plain appearances, gossiping conversation and ever-lasting knitting needles often mislead people to underestimating her as simply a curious old maid.

In her *Autobiography*, Christie writes about Miss Marple:

Murder at the Vicarage was published in 1930, but I cannot remember where, when or how I wrote it, why I came to write it, or even what suggested to me that I should select a new character- Miss Marple- to act as the sleuth in the story. Certainly at the time I had no intention of continuing her for the rest of my life. I did not know that she was to become a rival of Hercule Poirot. I think it is possible that Miss Marple arose from the pleasure I had taken in portraying Dr. Sheppard's sister in *The Murder of Roger Arkroyd*, she had been my favorite character in the book—an acidulated spinster, full of curiosity, knowing everything, hearing everything; the complete detective service in the home. I started with Miss Marple, the sort of old ladies who would have been rather like some of my grandmother's cronies—old ladies whom I have met in so many villages where I have gone to stay as a girl, Miss Marple was not in any way a picture of my grandmother; she was far more fussy and spinsterish than my grandmother ever was. But one thing she did have in common with her—though a cheerful person, she always expected the worst of everyone and everything, and was, with almost frightening accuracy, usually proved right.

That is how Miss Marple becomes a detective, here Christie also explains her character briefly which she possesses at the beginning of the fictional life. Over the years Miss Marple's nature changes radically. When she makes her first appearance in *The Murder at the Vicarage*, she is sharp-eyed, sharp-tongued, a gossip with an incomparable information service. And she is always ready to believe the worst. Her gardening is no more than a smokescreen for her insatiable curiosity about all things happened in her neighborhood. Her bird-watching is the ultimate length that curiosity can carry her to. Although she is acceptably described as having a gentle, applying manner, she is also called by one of the characters a nasty old cat. This judgment is a reasonable conclusion of her conducts and opinions in this novel.

But over the years the superficiality fades away gradually. The gardening becomes a genuine habit rather than a convenient excuse. Her gentle appealing manner becomes a real part of the qualities rather than a smokescreen. She becomes a wise and charming old lady with a not so mild view of human nature. Now her detective ability springs less from her spoonpiness than from her lengthy experience of the petty crimes and mysterious of village life. She becomes really sweet.

As an amateur detective, she has to look for murder, because it will seldom be brought to her, and the police will not summon her to solve it as they do to Poirot. She is not a detective at all in the strict sense of the term. Her cases are much more loosely organized affairs than Poirot's, and they are solved less by clues and reasoning than by intuition and comparison. At the end of a Miss Marple book the villain is usually forced into confession by a trick, or killed by another character, or commits suicide. She is an extremely homely and easygoing old lady. That is probably why Miss Marple is used much more frequently in Christie's later phases.

4. Comparison of Two Patterns

Poirot and Miss Marple are two absolutely different characters; the Poirot novels and Marple novels are as differentiated in patterns as their detectives.

The Poirot novels range from 1920 to 1975, but they inevitably share a number of common features designed to adapt to their little Belgian detective. Poirot is almost always introduced at an early stage, at least within the first one hundred pages. His subsequent investigation takes up most of the novel. Poirot investigates many suspects. Discusses the more important clues, and gradually uncovers and then analyzes the relevant information. He never provides a complete analysis until the end, but he does sort and sift through almost all relevant clues. Poirot, as a supreme relationalist, pursues his solution unyieldingly, and this is true of most novels in which he appears. Poirot's problem is always complicated, and we are invited to follow Poirot through each step of his investigating process. These novels all require us to play the same game as Poirot, even if we will almost never win. Indeed, to win would be to lose. To unravel the crime before Poirot will expose that the plot is not ingenious enough. Nonetheless, the reader must take such an effort to follow the narrative thread. Most of Poirot novels demonstrate his step-by-step analysis during the investigation. Such pattern requires that Christie play as fair as possible with the clues and make all relevant information available to reader. Any later additions to the evidence are against the spirit of the game played whenever Poirot is the detective.

In the Jane Marple novels, the detective is usually not the narrative center. A good illustration of this feature is *The Moving Finger* (1924). In this book Miss Marple does not appear until page 142 of a 198-page novel and only acts from eleven pages before the ten-page conclusion. In books like *A Murder Is Announced* and *A Pocket Full of Rye* (1953), Miss Marple first appears after about 80 pages which are devoted to the murder and the principle suspects. *A Pocket Full of Rye* is a rather typical case. Here Miss Marple arrives on the scene exactly halfway of the book, also halfway through the official investigation, which is conducted here by Inspector Neele. In the novel's later sections, we noticed that Miss Marple's conversations with suspects hardly seem like interrogations. On the contrary, the official investigation is more thorough and does produce information useful to us and to Miss Marple. However, we are always sure that the inspector's inferences are detective, yet we do not know what kind of approach Miss Marple is following

in her apparently random investigation. Her style is therefore very un-Poirotish. The relevant clues are not all available to us. It is rather difficult to figure out the direction in which Miss Marple is headed. There are fewer suspects and clues in Miss Marple novels, but arriving at Miss Marple's solutions is no easier than arriving at Poirot's.

Then why the Miss Marple novels are nearly impossible for the reader to solve? One important reason is that her game has its focus on mystification rather than detection. Carolin Sheppard, Miss Marple's prototype, is said to solve her problems by "inspired guesswork", and the same might be true to Miss Marple. In fact, the Miss Marple novels never employ the pattern of the Poirot novels, and there is little open explanation to balance the rather dense mystification until the end. At the end, of course, the mysterious Miss Marple clarifies everything in the manner of a spinsterish Holmes, and by means almost as unfair to the faithful reader as Doyle's.

The Miss Marple novels are fascinating in that their heroine's endearing character appeals to our experience if not to the solution of the crime. We can find more human traits in her than in Poirot. Readers interested in such facts perhaps do not care so much that the narrative games played in the Miss Marple novels are not as intricate as those in the Poirot novels. In any case, the differences between the Poirot and the Miss Marple novels indicate different variations of Christie's creating ability.

5. Conclusion

Poirot represents the cold and withdrawing side of his creator's nature, and he flourishes during that period when that side is uppermost. During the two decades following her disappearances, this is the main feature of Christie's character. Poirot, as a symbol of order and reason, just expresses the ideal of his creator and the reading public in the first half of the twentieth century. When people feel that the world has become an unfamiliar and chaotic place, they would like to turn to such a rational saviour. In Agatha's later years Poirot's rationality is replaced by Miss Marple's warmer humanity. Miss Marple is always a rather tender and ordinary character than Poirot. She possesses much more warmth and sympathy when she regards the weakness and flaws of others, and so comes to embody the impulsive and generous side of her author's nature. And she is warmly welcomed by Christie's fans because they also favor a change when the rigid thinking-and-reasoning type becomes rather familiar to them.

References

- Agatha Christie. (1977). *An Autobiography*. London: Harper Collins.
- Gillian Gill. (1999). *Agatha Christie: The Women and Her Mysteries*. London: Robinson Books.
- Mary S. Wagnor. (1986). *Agatha Christie*. Boston: Twayne Publications Inc.