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The Plot Construction in Agatha Christie's Novels

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Abstract

This paper views Agatha Christie's works on how they've been formed. Her early novels were created on the device called "the least likely person ploy", however, following the development literary narration, it turned into an innovated device, namely "the most likely suspect", which also makes an obvious classification in her whole-life writing period.

Keywords: Agatha Christie, Device development, Narrative strategy

1. Introduction

In *Poetics*, it is evident that Aristotle puts great emphasis on plot in his doctrine on tragedy. He warns: "one may string together a series of characteristic speeches of the uttermost finish as regards diction and thought, and yet fail to produce the true dramatic effect; but one will have much better success with a story which, however inferior in these respects, has a plot." Then he mentions, "so to speak, the first essential, the life and soul of the tragedy is the plot, and the characters come second". Aristotle defines a tragedy as an "action of a destructive or painful nature; such as murders, tutures, woundings and the like." As we know, these elements are the exact major matters in the detective novel today. In this sense, it is justified to say that tragedy is just the literary form which the detective novel chose in his day. Thus we can firmly argue that what Aristotle says about tragedy is also true to the detective novel today.

The disciplines of the detective novel are also the requirements for good storytelling. In a detective story, every difference, every character must contribute to the story, no digressing is permitted. It is a game between author and reader, its goal is to find the villain, and dirty play is not admitted. What the writer says must push the story forward, must have a bearing on the plot. So it is the plot that matters and counts. To work under such alimitation requires skills. The relationship between the detective novel and the novel paper can be compared to that of the sonnet and poetry.

Christie's success lies mostly in their puzzle plotting and her genuine structure. Compared with her contemporaries, we cannot find the atmospheric background of Margery Ellingham, or fine writing of Dorothy Sayers in Christie's stories. Most often, those elements would distract attention from the central business of the detective story—the puzzle. This genre's methods of writing leave the writer no room for showing off. And any enjoyment in the course of writing could only disturb the beautiful layout of the puzzle. In its most concentrated and purest form of the classical detective novel, atmosphere and character are deduced to the minimum, and function only as necessary embodiments of the structure of detection and misfication. Plots of Christie's novels are usually concentrated along the processes of finding the villain.

2. Development of the old device

Since "who did it" is the center of a detective story, after repeated practice, "the least-likely-person ploy" becomes the leading device of this genre since Poe's day. Poe used this method of building a plot in one of his rather minor story "Thou are the man". Most critics of this literary formula agree that this plot is the standard device in classical detective fiction. In the typical intellectual type of detective stories, after the murder takes place, the detective then follows up quietly from clue to clue. During the process of investigation, the figure of guilt moves from suspect till it falls on the real guilty party which seems the most impossible to do the murder. This rule is followed unquetionably until it comes to Christie.

At the beginning of her career, Christie also followed the doctrine. In th*e Mysterious Affairs at Styles*, Miss Howard is the housekeeper of old Mrs. Inglethorp. And she seems to have most deep affection towards the old lady, but finally turns out to be the accomplice of the villain. Once lauches into the "least likely suspect" vein, Agatha will never look

back until she exhausts all its possibilities. As a matter of fact, she develops this device so extremely that this description became inacurate for her new murders. The device she uses now might be described as "the never-suspected-person ploy". The real culprits in such novels by one way or another can always persuade the reader not to consider them as suspects at all.

A typical example of this method is *The murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the novel which has established is author's reputation. In this novel, the killer is not only in the Dr. watson role but also a first person narrator which the reader assumes could not turn out to be the criminal. Christie uses Hercule Poirot to perform the detective's task during the investigation. Poirot is the main character in the novel, while eleven other characters make up the list of suspects for the murder of Mr. Ackroyd. The appearance of each suspects is carefully arranged, all getting equal time and all having done something to be guilty of. Christie calls this fair paly. The setting is in an English Village called King's overdose of veronal. No more than 24 hours later, Roger Ackroyd, the man the widow is going to marry, is found murdered in his own study. The other characters include a butler, a housekeeper, a parlor maid, a kitchen maid, a cook, a secretary, an English lass and her mother, a major, a doctor and his sister, and a stranger. The story is told through the narrative voice of Dr. Lames Sheppard, "a discreet country doctor with the reticence of a father confessor". Dr. Sheppard allies with Hercule Poirot throughout the entire investigation of looking for Ackroyd's murderer. During this process he writes an account of his own opinions and conclusions to the mystery. Not until the last five pages dose the reader become shocked, amazed, and excited to find out that it is indeed the good doctor who turns out to be the killer.

In this novel, the reader follows through Dr.Sheppard's journey of collecting clues. However, trying to pick out who may be the correct murderer is still not easy. Critic Mary Wagnor indicates that the reader has difficulty in selecting the true criminal because the comic narrative voice of Dr.Sheppard. An example of Dr.Sheppard' s humorous character is he describes his sister Caroline as "somebody like her must have invented the questions on passports". When he judges his new neighbor Piorot, he says "there's no doubt at all about what the man's profession has been. He's a retired hairdresser. Look at that mustache of his". Sheppard's narrative voice produces the comic nature of the novel, which makes selecting him as the murderer difficult. Here the murderer's intention in narrating the investigating story is to chronicle a failure on the part of the great detective. Instead, the course of the novel demonstrates that he is forced to record his own failure. Meanwhile, he chronicles another story of the great detective's triumphs.

With *The murder of Roger Ackroyd,* Christie brings about the greatest controversy in mystery history. This novel is greeted with an outcry of unfairness for its unprecedented and unexpected solution. The most special with its plot is that a fictional narrator is made to tell the truth, but here Dr.Sheppard conceals his guilt on the contrary. From the very beginning, the reader expects that Sheppard would be the detective's assistant, and would act as Hastings. In fact, he only replaces Hastings in narrative function. Christie disobeys the reader's such expectations, and has the disinterested narrator turn out to be the killer. However, everyone decided it was all right in the end of the debate about whether Christie played fair. They accepted that if Agatha Christie had played foul she had invented a new kind of foul the rulebook had not included.

If we thus allege Christie ignores conventions, it is unfair, too. For she has a wonderful understanding of the conventions of the detective-story genre. And most importantly she knows how to unexpectedly shock a reader who is cultivated under these conversations. Take the solution to *Murder on the Orient Express* for an example. In a detective story, it is most likely that one or two of the possible suspects will turn out to be the guilty party and much more closely connected to the dead person than she or he pretends. This conversation has grown up and been followed undoubtedly by writers and readers of detective fiction. But in *Murder on the Orient Express*, we are made aware that one after another of the passengers is connected with the Armstrong kidnapping case. We are about to cry "absurd" when Poiriot says: "this cannot be coincidence, this can only be conspiracy, and all the suspects must have had a hand in the murder." What is more, Christie's innovation even does further in this book. In the end the criminals are let off scot-free because they have rid the world of a monster the law cannot reach, and therefore they should not be punished. This shows Christie's respect for the people who take the law into their own hands.

3. New narrative strategies

Now Christie can go nowhere if she continues to follow this rule to create her plot. She has made the least likely person even the never suspected person her culprit. And she is never pleased to fight a second battle with the same strategy. So she invents another of her own fictional equivalent of the old device: the rule of "the most likely suspect". In fact, as she acknowlodges in her autobiography, she takes great efforts to exonerate the obvious candidate by means of a seemingly unshakable alibi, then reveals this person to be the criminal indeed.

One of Agatha's most famous novels, *Death on the Nile*, is a good example to illustrate the most-likely suspect plot. In this novel, the seemingly estranged couple—Jacqueline de Bellefort and Simon Doyle—are the most likely suspects, and also the ones with the most benefit to gain. Christie handles the situation in such a way as to assure the experienced reader of detective fiction that Jackie and Simon are not only the most likely suspects but also the actual killers. The reader is led to anticipate the final solution but still cannot figure out how the obvious murders have managed to achieve

their purpose. In fact, Christie uses 150 pages to describe the elaborate investigations. And also she has Poiriot repeatedly summerize the evidence in order to organize the relevant clues. But we are just unable to penetrate the obvious deception and guess the method they employ.

Indeed, Christie plays the hide and seek with us throughout the investigation. For example, she allows Colonel Race to offer a list of no less than fourteen suspects—none of which is Jackie or Simon. However, on the other hand, she permits her murders to indicate their conspiracy by letting the dull Simon employ Jackie's metaphor. Alert readers will remember, at an early stage, Jackie describes what Linnet has done to Jackie as the sun eclipsing the moon. Simon obviously borrows the figure of speech from Jackie, despite their supposed estrangement. The unusual ingenuity of the crime withstands 150 pages of scrutiny. This delicate structure enables Christie to work out her remarkably deceptive puzzle while continuing to focus on the most important characters of the novel. This attention to Jackie and Simon makes Christie's conclusion dramatically as well as intellectually satisfying. For the resolution still involves characters and dramatic situations we have followed throughout the book. This is one of Christie's most sophisticated and also successful narrative games.

As Christie writes in her autobiography, she is fond of the kind of plot in which somebody obvious is finally proved guilty. Many novels plotted under this rule show her best, but still this is not the method she sticks to till the end. Christie's another Poiriot novel, *Evil under the Sun*, which was written shortly after *Death on the Nile*, has a seemingly very similar plot with the latter. In each case, the murdered victim is a wealthy woman who appears to have taken a handsome young man from his finance or wife, but actually the apparently estranged couple is plotting this woman's death for financial interests. In each novel we first observe the couple's efforts to convince Pioriot that they are indeed estranged. After this elaborate introduction, each novel comes to describe a murder for which the estranged couple has perfect alibis. In each book, Poiriot begins to investigate the crime at this point. About a dozen suspects all seem to be possilble solutions. In each case the interrogation encounters many twists. Of course, it is Poiriot's task to explain when and how each murder is committed, as well as by whom and why. We now come to know that the estranged couple is not estranged at all and the crime is most cruelly premeditated. In each book Poiriot smashes the couple's imperfect alibis and effectively exonerates the innocents.

Though these two novels seem extremely similar to each other, they employ completely different plotting patterns. *Death on the Nile* develops the dramatic situation Christie later on employs in *Evil under the Sun*, but her narrative game here is radically different from that played in the early novel. Not long after the beginning scene in *Death on the Nile,* we can guess from our reading experience that Jackie and Simon are the guilty party except that we only do not know how they manage the murder. However, in *Evil under the Sun* there are twelve equally suspected characters. It might be added here that Christie favors this murder of suspects. It is large enough for the desired complexity, yet not too large to be recalled by alert reader.

Based on the above analysis, we may name the narrative game just described in *Evil under the Sun* as "equal-opportunity-suspects ploy". This device has its advantages and disadvantages that are closely related to each other. Each character appeals to us, for each is an interesting and genuine suspect. The nature of the game requires that Christie spread her attention equally among her relatively large cast of suspects. As a result, no character can be fully developed. The ultimate solution is almost always surprising, but it is also seems to arise from only a few of the details generated by the detective's investigation. Indeed, much of what we learn in the course of the investigation is deliberately arranged misleading information. The resulting sense of arbitrariness is almost unavoidable. The reason is that the murderer's ploy is not sufficiently clever to withstand too much narrative attention. If we are encouraged to review the actions of Patrick and Christine Redfern more closely than those of the other suspects, it might be likely for us to guess how Patrick might have killed his wealthy lover after he supposedly found her dead body. And once his idea occurs to us, the game is over. So Christie provides very few details about the Redferns even though they are two-thirds of the love triangle. She is also especially careful to give no hint about why the Redferns might profit from Arlina Marshell's death. Such tactics of concealment enables her narrative game to last till the novel's final pages.

4. Conclusion

The murder of Roger Ackroyd, Death on the Nile and *Evil under the Sun* offer specific examples of Christie's ingenious craftsmanship as a puzzle maker. I believe another several dozen works can be cited as successful variations on the classical formula Agatha represents. These novels compose a narrative series according to the narrative strategy they employed. At one end of the series are those books like *The murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in which the murderer is indeed the least likely suspect. This least likeliness rises from the fact that the murderer appears to be one of the victims or is a member of the investigating team. It is not because she or he is an unnoticed servant or a distant relative of the victim. At the other end of this series is *Death on the Nile*, the most extreme instance of books structured on the most-likely-suspect device. At the midpoint of this series are books like *Evil under the Sun,* in which most of the characters are equally plausible solutions to the puzzle. To locate Christie's detective novels along this series enables us to identify the more crucial details of the plots and recognize the strategies which her interesting novels are based on.

Indeed, Sayers regarded "the least- likely-person ploy" as already old hat in 1928, and Christie herself also intended to see this tactics as notorious and almost never employed this device without some innovation. The killer is not unlikely in the traditional sense, but appears to be the intended victim, as in *Death on the Nile*, or figures among the investigators as in *The murder of Roger Ackroyd.*

In these cases, the murderer is really the least likely suspect, but it is misleading to say that in such books the guilty is finally projected onto someone on the edge or outside the magic circle. Such ideas imply that Christie typically settles on a marginal figure whose guilt conveniently makes the main characters and their comfortable society undisturbed. Gillian Gill rightly objects that Christie "never keeps her reader in suspense for 200 pages only to cop out at the end by pinning the crime on a person whose motivation has been wholly obscure". It is true that such novels as *Peril at End House* do fight hard to keep the reader away from looking at real murderer as a suspect. But many novels like *The murder of Roger Ackroyd* are original more satisfying games played under this rule. So we have to admit that Christie has always been innovating this particular narrative game without breaking its basic rules.

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