

**Agatha Christie and the Invention
of a New Genre: ' Orthodox Detective Fiction '**

- 1. At the time *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is published, the larger culture is engaging in a debate about the literary value of detective stories.**
 - a. From the 1920s onward in Europe and North America, detective fiction was a well-established genre, with serial novels and short stories selling very well with the reading public.
 - i. In fact, detective fiction was selling so well that serious authors were worried it was eclipsing the sales of fictions of more enduring literary value. In the 1920s, for example, James Joyce publishes *Ulysses*, a novel that is frequently given the highest praise but which is little read because its stream-of-consciousness language is so challenging to follow.
 - ii. Throughout the 20th century, the standards for literature with a capital L were
 - (1) an orientation towards innovation - authors were experimenting with new ideas, new ways of portraying reality. They wanted to confront readers with unfamiliar situations and ideas.
 - (2) a seriousness of purpose - authors sought to focus on more important human events and ideas - rather than the sensationalized subjects of detective fictions.
 - (3) elegant, condensed, or literary language. Authors believed readers should work hard, and they designed books and poems that challenge readers to think, and mirror the increasingly fragmentary nature of human consciousness.
 - iii. Detective fictions failed to meet these standards. Instead, they provided readers with
 - (1) seriality - chains of novels with same characters.
 - (2) formulaic elements - repetition of plot elements, situations, and stereotypical characters
 - (3) transparent language that did not challenge readers' ability to think.
 - b. At mid-century, Edmund Wilson (in 1945) and W. H. Auden (in 1954), two famous serious writers, went on record stating their views of the two extremes of the conflict. Both assume a joking tone that masks the seriousness of the debate.
 - i. Wilson is repelled by detective fiction's repetitiveness and lack of imagination and innovation. He jokingly describes it as a waste of paper and abjures his fellow readers to stop consuming it.
 - ii. Auden, on the other hand, describes himself as addicted to detective fiction's formulaicness - he finds it soothing, druglike - like a new brand of whiskey.
 - iii. The impression they both leave, however, is that detective fiction is hardly worth calling fiction, and that it falls into some other category of consumable that should not be considered literature.
 - c. Agatha Christie jokes about such debates in the dedication to Roger Ackroyd, in which she says: the first major proponent of "orthodox detective fiction." Auden and Wilson are both reacting to her tremendous influence and popularity.
 - i. Christie's reputation hinges on 2 things:
 - (1) an enormous serial opus (she published more than 80 novels and also wrote mysteries under the pseudonym Mary Westmacott).

- (2) her use of a standard plot with ingenious but minor deviations, which she calls "an orthodox detective story."
- ii. She makes her first reference to this in the dedication of *Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, which reads "To PUNKIE, who likes an orthodox detective story, with murder, inquest, and suspicion falling on every one in turn!"
- iii. The "orthodox detective story" for Christie equals seriality - the same book written over and over, varying the formula slightly each time; varies scenery (the Nile, the Orient Express) but not milieu: varies detectives slightly (Poirot, Marple, Tommy & Tuppence, etc.).

2. Characteristics of Christie's "orthodox" detective fiction:

- a. **Plot:** (students are usually able to generate these items - esp. those who have read Christie's novels before)
 - i. Murder [at the beginning of the text]. This rarely varies. Grotesque forms of violence are unusual - usually the worst is a stabbing or gunshot. Often, poison.
 - ii. Inquest (legal inquiry but not trial into suspicious circumstances of death), which is distinguished from a criminal prosecution in that it's a combination of a local town hearing and a coroner's investigation into the circumstances of a death.
 - iii. "Suspicion falling on every one in turn!" Everyone in the circle is a suspect.
 - iv. Closure: a masterful speech by the detective to the assembled suspects (including the guilty party) in the last pages. Suspect is always located, always punished.
- b. **Characterization:**
 - i. **The "criminal who is not a criminal":** amateur criminal affected with some kind of hubris - some desire to do or have something out of reach. Christie's "criminals" are rarely purely evil; usually they're tripped up by their own subconscious desire to be "caught."
 - ii. **No professional or recurring criminals.** Unlike Holmes, Christie's detectives are rarely faced with professional criminals whose genius is comparable to their own, and no criminal, to my knowledge, appears in more than one of Christie's novels.
 - iii. **The perfectly nice suspects and community.** "NICE PEOPLE" from the upper classes seems conservative - but actually radical - challenges notion that criminals are (1) insane or (2) impoverished or (3) living in the Big City.
 - (1) Instead: "respectable," upper-class people living in small communities who commit crimes.
 - iv. **A detective who is effective because the suspects' stereotypes of him or her as helpless, foreign, or weak-seeming makes them discount the detective's intelligence and effectiveness.**

- (1) Poirot as Belgian, short, and possibly homosexual (on 21, Sheppard, assuming that HP is a hairdresser, subtly misconstrues Poirot's comments about his relationship to his former sidekick Hastings.)
- (2) Miss Jane Marple, an elderly spinster, is Christie's other great detective; she is marginalized because she lacks social position and thus is ignored. Because of her unobtrusive social invisibility she is able to gather a great deal of information without raising anyone's hackles or suspicions, and thus almost always succeeds in solving the case.

3. How does AC's formula compare to ACD's?

- a. ACD: Holmes at home, being diverted from his boredoms by a "singular" turn of events out there in the infinitude of London or the countryside - an arena too impossibly large to be surveilled.
- b. Holmes uncovers an anti-social (usually unethical or potentially criminal rather than criminal) event or threat of an event, and effective solution of the mystery by careful reading of the "singular" clues that Holmes can separate out of the infinitude of possibilities.
- c. No murder needs to take place; there is a de-emphasis, if not outright contempt for, the legal process of conviction and imprisonment, and Holmes's victims (the criminals themselves) sometimes go free. Paradoxically, Holmes's problems in an earlier time involve less overt criminality - the infinitude of London doesn't seem to make people as evil as living in a village.

4. Roger Ackroyd critiques small-town life

a. *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* a variant on the locked-room mystery

- i. In this case, the locked room is the tiny community of King's Abbot. There is a limited cast of players, limited environs, a tight community where everyone knows and watches everyone else, and the possibility of nearly sealing off the town to treat it as a locked room.
- ii. Everyone is literally/figuratively related to everyone else: people living together as in joint families. Both Sheppards (Caroline and James) and Ackroyds (large extended family, with aunts and stepchildren and hint that Mrs Ferrar will soon join).
- iii. "Small town" stereotypically = "trust," but Christie suggests that in fact it is tight quarters that breeds anger and the motive for murder.

b. Surveillance as an important element of small-town life

- i. Surveillance - the overt or covert monitoring of others' behavior - is the norm. (Caroline is perhaps the epitome of this in *Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.)
 - (1) Surveillance has always been a part of small-town life - sociologists call it a method of social control - but at the time *Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is published, surveillance is being transformed into a process conducted electronically (in cities) rather than socially (in villages).
 - (2) Villagers as spies: Instead of the police solving crimes among people, people begin to police one another - to snoop and spy on all kinds of "singular" or socially disruptive behavior, such as Mrs. Ferrar's husband's mysterious death and her own demise at the beginning of the novel. "We are rich in unmarried ladies and retired military officers. Our hobbies and recreations can be summed up in the one word, 'gossip.' (7)

- (3) Atmosphere of surveillance prevails in the village and in the narrator and his household. Dr. S surveils people by watching their physical health; he is on hand when Mrs. Ferrars is poisoned. He himself feels surveilled by his sister Caroline, who conducts her surveillance people by gathering information (throwback to Penelope Betteredge, who serves her father by gathering information in TM) "Fortunately long association with Caroline has led me to preserve an impassive countenance, and to be ready with small non-committal remarks" (12).
- (4) Village as corrupt: Murder that is the main point of investigation - the murder of RA - is decentered, presupposed by the title. The mysterious death of Mrs. Ferrars at the beginning of the text prefigures it, establishing the village as an unsafe safe-seeming place - the opposite of the countryside in SHerlock Holmes stories, where Mrs. St. Clair waits for Neville to come home from the evil city and back to his "true self."
- (5) Village as prison: Thus there doesn't really have to be a prison; under a regime of informal surveillance, life itself is a prison of social controls.

"[Miss Russell] has a stern eye, and lips that shut tightly, and I feel that if I were an under housemaid or a kitchenmaid I should run for my life whenever I heard her coming" (13).

5. Surveillance as the mode of both Poirot and of small-town culture

- a. Definition: surveillance is a French-derived word meaning a close observation of a person or group, especially one under suspicion, or the condition of observing others or being observed.
- b. Surveillance plays an important role in modern conceptions of penal enforcement.
 - i. 18th century Utilitarian philosopher Jeremy Bentham devised a round prison known as the Panopticon that was designed to allow a small number of guards to monitor the behavior of many prisoners. The Panopticon was the architectural manifestation of surveillance. (See the plan for the Panopticon below.)
 - (1) the design was ergonomically efficient, allowing a minimum number of employees to supervise a maximum number of prisoners
 - (2) more important, it was thought to enforce good behavior through surveillance: if inmates were watched, the theory went, they would automatically regulate and correct their bad behavior.
- c. The Panopticon is important historically, since it serves as model for what is becoming normal in the 20th century urban environment: constant electronic surveillance to ensure good behavior.
 - i. Examples: ATM cameras, web-cams, reality-based TV shows, etc.

6. Poirot and the village as panopticons

- a. The detective and the village both serve as panopticons - fishbowl examining devices designed to enforce confession and good behavior through observation rather than through violence (torture, blackmail) or even coercion.
- b. Poirot's mantra, "Everyone has something to hide" is repeated throughout the novel. Like a priest, Poirot waits for people to confess instead of forcing them to tell; he relies on peer pressure, observation, and the constant study of people to bring out their confessions of guilt. At the end of the novel, he never forces the criminal to confess, but allows the criminal to make his own confession and even his own execution!

