
PHRASEOLOGICAL ANALYSIS OF STORIES BY AGATHA CHRISTIE

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Abstract. The article is devoted to Christie's own contributions to the genre as a peaceful, usually upper-class setting into which violence intrudes; satire of her own heroes, craft, and genre; a grand finale in which all characters involved gather for the dramatic revelation of truth; the careful access to all clues; increased emphasis on the "who" and the "why" with less interest in the "how"; heavy use of dialogue and lightning-quick description, which create a fast-paced, easy read; a consistent moral framework for the action; and the willingness to allow absolutely any character to be guilty, a precedent-setting break with the tradition.

Key words: classical, detective, character, caricature, plot, publication, mystery, dramatic, description

Agatha Christie's (15 September 1890 – 12 January 1976) trademarks in detective fiction brought to maturity the classical tradition of the genre, which was in its adolescence when she began to write. The tradition had some stable characteristics, but she added many more and perfected existing ones. The classical detective hero, for example, from Edgar Allan Poe on, according to Ellsworth Grant, is of "superior intellect," is "fiercely independent," and has "amusing idiosyncrasies." Christie's Hercule Poirot was crafted by these ground rules and reflects them in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* but quickly begins to deplore this Sherlock Holmes type of detecting. Poirot would rather think from his armchair than rush about, magnifying glass in hand, searching for clues. He may, by his words, satirize classical detection, but he is also satirizing himself, as Christie well knew.

Christie's own contributions to the genre can be classified mainly as the following: a peaceful, usually upper-class setting into which violence intrudes; satire of her own heroes, craft, and genre; a grand finale in which all characters involved gather for the dramatic revelation of truth; the careful access to all clues; increased emphasis on the "who" and the "why" with less interest in the "how"; heavy use of dialogue and lightning-quick description, which create a fast-paced, easy read; a consistent moral framework for the action; and the willingness to allow absolutely any character to be guilty, a precedent-setting break with the tradition. Her weakness, critics claim, is in her barely two-dimensional characters and in their lack of psychological depth.

Christie created, as Grant puts it, a great many interesting “caricatures of people we have met.” Grant excuses her on the grounds that allowing every character to be a possible suspect limits the degree to which they can be psychologically explored. One might also attribute her caricatures to her great admiration for Charles Dickens, who also indulged in caricatures, especially with his minor characters. Christie herself gives a simple explanation. She judged it best not to write about people she actually knew, preferring to observe strangers in railroad stations and restaurants, perhaps catching a fragment of their conversation. From this glimpse, she would make up a character and a plot. Character fascinated her endlessly, but, like Miss Marple, she believed the depths of human iniquity were in everyone, and it was only in the outward manifestation that people became evil or good. “I could’ve done it,” a juvenile character cries in *Evil Under the Sun*. “Ah, but you didn’t and between those two things there is a world of difference,” Poirot replies.

In spite of Christie’s simplistic judgment of human character, she manages, on occasion (especially in her novels of the 1940’s and later), to make accurate and discerning forays into the thought processes of some characters. In *Death Comes in the End*, considerable time is spent on Renisenb’s internal musings. Caught in the illiterate role which her time (Egypt, 2000 b.c.e.) and sex status decree for her, Renisenb struggles to achieve language so she can articulate her anxieties about evil and good. Her male friend, Hori, speaks at great length of the way that evil affects people. “People create a false door, to deceive,” he says, but “when reality comes and touches them with the feather of truth—their truth self reasserts itself.” When Norfret, a beautiful concubine, enters a closed, self-contained household and threatens its stability, all the characters begin to behave differently. The murderer is discovered precisely because he is the only person who does not behave differently on the outside. Any innocent person would act guilty because the presence of evil touches self-doubts and faults; therefore, the one who acts against this Christie truth and remains normal in the face of murder must, in fact, be guilty.

Although *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* is marred by overwriting and explanations that Christie sheds in later books, it shows signs of those qualities that will make her great. The village of Styles St. Mary is quiet, and Styles House is a typical country manor. The book is written in the first person by Hastings, who comes to visit his old friend John Cavendish and finds him dealing with a difficult family situation. His mother married a man who everyone agrees is a fortune hunter. Shortly afterward, she dies of poison in full view of several family members, calling her husband’s name. Hastings runs into Hercule Poirot at the post office; an old acquaintance temporarily residing at Styles, he is a former police inspector from Belgium. Christie’s idea in this first novel seems to be that Hastings will play Watson to Poirot’s Holmes, although she quickly tires of this arrangement and in a later book ships Hastings off to Argentina.

Every obvious clue points to the husband as the murderer. Indeed, he is the murderer and has made arrangements with an accomplice so that he will be

brought to a speedy trial. At the trial, it would then be revealed that the husband had an absolute alibi for the time when the poison must have been administered; hence, he and his accomplice try to encourage everyone to think him guilty. Poirot delays the trial and figures out that the real poison was in the woman's own medicine, which contained a substance that would only become fatal if released from other elements. It then would settle to the bottom of the bottle and the last dose would be lethal. Bromide is an ingredient that separates the elements. Bromide was added at the murderer's leisure, and he had only to wait until the day when she would take the last dose, making sure that both he and his accomplice are seen by many people far distant from the household at the time she is declared to have been poisoned. The plot is brilliant, and Christie received congratulations from a chemists' association for her correct use of the poisons in the book.

By the publication of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, her sixth book, Christie had hit her stride. Although Poirot's explanations are still somewhat lengthy, the book is considered one of her best. It is chiefly noted for the precedent it set in detective fiction. The first-person narrator, Dr. Sheppard, turns out to be the murderer. The skill with which this is revealed and concealed is perhaps Christie at her most subtle. The reader is made to like Dr. Sheppard, to feel he or she is being taken into his confidence as he attempts to write the history of Roger Ackroyd's murder as it unwinds. Poirot cultivates Dr. Sheppard's acquaintanceship, and the reader believes, because he hears it from Dr. Sheppard, that Poirot trusts him. In the end, Dr. Sheppard is guilty. Christie allows herself to gloat at her own fiendish cleverness through the very words that Sheppard uses to gloat over his crime when he refers back to a part of his narrative (the story itself is supposedly being written to help Poirot solve the crime) where a discerning reader or sleuth ought to have found him out.

The Body in the Library, executed with Christie's usual skill, is distinctive for two elements: the extended discussions of Miss Marple's sleuthing style and the humorous dialogue surrounding the discovery of the body of an unknown young woman in the library of a good family. Grant says of Jane Marple that she insists, as she knits, that human nature never changes. O. L. Bailey expands upon this in *Saturday Review* (1973): "Victorian to the core," he writes, "she loves to gossip, and her piercing blue eyes twinkle as she solves the most heinous crimes by analogy to life in her archetypal English village of St. Mary Mead."

Marple, as well as the other characters, comments on her methods. Marple feels her success is in her skeptical nature, calling her mind "a sink." She goes on to explain that "the truth is . . . that most people . . . are far too trusting for this wicked world." Another character, Sir Henry, describes her as "an old lady with a sweet, placid, spinsterish face and a mind that has plumbed the depths of human iniquity and taken it as all in the day's work."

Through a delightfully comic conversation between Mr. and Mrs. Bantry, the possibility of a dead body in the library is introduced, and, once it is discovered, the story continues in standard sleuth style; the opening dialogue, however, is

almost too funny for the subject matter. Ralph Tyler in Saturday Review (1975) calls this mixture of evil and the ordinary a distancing of death “by bringing it about in an upper-middle- class milieu of consummate orderliness.” In that milieu, the Bantrys’ dialogue is not too funny; it is quite believable, especially since they do not yet know the body is downstairs.

Perhaps a real Christie aficionado can be identified by his reaction to Tommy and Tuppence Beresford of *The Secret Adversary*, an engaging pair of sleuths who take up adventuring because they cannot find work in postwar England. Critics dismiss or ignore the pair, but Christie fans often express a secret fondness for the two. In *Tommy and Tuppence*, readers find heroes close to home. The two blunder about and solve mysteries by luck as much as by anything else. Readers can easily identify with these two and even feel a bit protective of them.

Tommy and Tuppence develop a romance as they establish an “adventurers for hire” agency and wait for clients. Adventure begins innocently when Tommy tells Tuppence he has overheard someone talking about a woman named Jane Finn and comments disgustedly, “Did you ever hear such a name?” Later they discover that the name is a password into an international spy ring.

The use of luck and coincidence in the story is made much of by Christie herself. Christie seems to tire of the frequent convenient circumstances and lets Tommy and Tuppence’s romance and “high adventure” lead the novel’s progress. When Tommy asks Mr. Carter, the British spy expert, for some tips, Carter replies, “I think not. My experts, working in stereotyped ways, have failed. You will bring imagination and an open mind to the task.” Mr. Carter also admits that he is superstitious and that he believes in luck “and all that sort of thing.” In this novel, readers are presented with a clever story, the resolution of which relies on elements quite different from deductive reasoning or intuition. It relies on those qualities which the young seem to exude and attract: audacity and luck.

In *N or M? The New Mystery*, Tommy and Tuppence (now married and some twenty years older) are again unemployed. Their two children are both serving their country in World War II. The parents are bemoaning their fate when a messenger from their old friend Mr. Carter starts them on a spy adventure at the seacoast hotel of Sans Souci. They arrive with the assumed names Mr. Meadows and Mrs. Blenkinsop. Mrs. Blenkinsop, they agree, will pursue Mr. Meadows and every now and then corner him so they can exchange information. The dialogue is amusing and there is a good deal of suspense, but too many characters and a thin plot keep this from being one of Christie’s best.

At times, it seems that Christie withholds clues; the fact that all evidence is presented to the reader is the supreme test of good detective fiction. Mrs. Sprot, adopted mother of Betty, coolly shoots Betty’s real mother in the head while the woman is holding Betty over the edge of a cliff. The reader cannot be expected to know that the woman on the cliff is Betty’s real mother. Nor can the reader be expected to decipher Tuppence’s mutterings about the story of Solomon. In the story of Solomon, two women claim the same baby, and Solomon decrees that the

woman who is willing to give up her child rather than have it killed is the real mother. Since both women in this scene appear willing to jeopardize the baby's life, the reader is likely, justifiably, to form some wrong conclusions. This seems less fair than Christie usually is in delivering her clues.

In *Sleeping Murder*, written several years before its 1976 publication date, Christie achieves more depth in her portrayal of characters than before: Gwenda, her dead stepmother, Dr. Kennedy, and some of the minor characters such as Mr. Erskine are excellent examples. The motivation in the book is, at least, psychological, as opposed to murder for money or personal gain, which are the usual motives in Christie's novels. There seems, in short, to be much more probing into the origin and motivation of her characters' actions.

Her last novel, *Sleeping Murder* ends with the romantic young couple and the wise old Miss Marple conversing on the front porch of a hotel in, of all places, Torquay, Christie's beloved birthplace. Christie came full circle, celebrating her romantic and impulsive youth and her pleasant old age in one final reunion at home in Torquay, England.

For example:

Here and there - "I've knocked about here and there, sir."

Part and parcel - "It's part and parcel of the whole business."

As the devil - "Oh, clever as the devil!"

As mad as a hatter - "Sometimes, I feel sure he is as mad as a hatter..."

Not to mince matters - "Look here - not to mince matters - you didn't give her an overdose, did you?"

Not to know smb. from Adam - "...my dear child, do you remember that Bassington- French knows you. He doesn't know me from Adam."

Jack of all trades - "Oh, I suppose she was after your time. She's the mater's factotum, companion, Jack of all trades!"

Ghost of a... (smth.) - "What a white, bloodless ghost of a woman!"

The devil of it - "The devil of it is that that's all probably been provided for."

A beast of prey - Like a beast of prey, heavy weather fell upon him...

A bad lot - "He's a bad lot."

Foul play - "Yes, time is an advantage if - if - there has been foul play."

Double Dutch - "It's double Dutch to me."

To speak one's mind - "At any rate," she burst out, "I've spoken my mind!"

To pull smb.'s leg - "Poirot, you're pulling my leg!"

At hand - "The day of judgment is very close at hand."

In a minute - "It's nothing. She's fainted, that's all. She'll be round in a minute."

Under the strain - "Inequalities of temper were easily accounted for out there, where men's nerves were continually snapping under the strain."

To be hand in glove with smb. - "Anyone could see with half an eye that the woman was as pious as could be - the kind that was hand in glove with parsons."

A goose is walking over smb.'s grave - "It makes me feel as if a goose were walking over my grave."

To make one's mind up for smb. - Had great power with a jury - it was said he could make their minds up for them any day of the week.

With a fine tooth-comb - "We went over the place with a fine tooth-comb."

Inabrownstudy - "Standing there, he fell into a brown study."

At any rate - "I shall be getting a free holiday at any rate."

To have got something up one's sleeve - "If I'm not greatly mistaken, he's got something up his sleeve."

To keep one's nose to the grindstone - "No, now that he had arrived, he must keep his nose to the grindstone."

To take smb.'s words out of smb.'s mouth - "Vera took the words out of his mouth."

To be caught red-handed - The man's caught red-handed.

The house that Jack built - Photo No. 3 represents the highly magnified surface of a tiny bottle in the top poison cupboard of the dispensary in the Red Cross Hospital at Tadminster - which sounds like the house that Jack built!

Tooth and nail - She ranged herself passionately on her husband's side, scorning the mere idea of his guilt, and fought for him tooth and nail.

To take smth. With a grain of salt - "One might take that with a grain of salt," I remarked sceptically.

To be in the dark - Perhaps you don't realize that I am still in the dark.

To talk about smb. behind his (her) back - Later, he'd had an uneasy feeling that people were talking about him behind his back.

To spill the beans - Then, last night, some unknown lunatic spills the beans.

To trust smb. a yard - "I don't know - exactly. But I wouldn't trust him a yard."

To feel it in one's bones - "Let's get finished. I feel it in my bones we're not going to find anything."

Old bird - "I couldn't let the old bird down, could I?"

Go to pieces - And if *she* goes to pieces, his neck's in danger!

Neck is in danger - And if *she* goes to pieces, his neck's in danger!

To keep cool- "You must keep cool. This isn't like you. You've always had excellent nerves."

To do a bunk - "He's done a bunk, he has," he said to himself.

To go wrong - "The best-laid plans go wrong, as my present predicament shows."

To play into smb.' hands - "However, your young naval friend played into my hands very nicely."

To throw smth. into smb.'s teeth. - "Or throw your poverty in your teeth, or anything like that..."

To be at smb.'s feet - "The world was at his feet."

To face the music - "This is a tragic business," he said. "Poor fellow. So, he felt he couldn't face the music. Too bad. Too bad."

The brand of Cain - "The third is symbolical. The manner of my death marking me on the forehead. The brand of Cain."

Judgment Day - "Why don't we wake up? Wake up - Judgment Day - no, not that!"

As mad as a hatter - "Sometimes, I feel sure he is as mad as a hatter; and then, just as he is at his maddest, I find there is method in his madness."

God Almighty - "That is to say, he's played God Almighty for a good many months every year."

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