

Agatha Christie: The Murder of Roger Ackroyd



DC-I, Semester-II

Paper IV: Popular Literature

Chapter: Agatha Christie: The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

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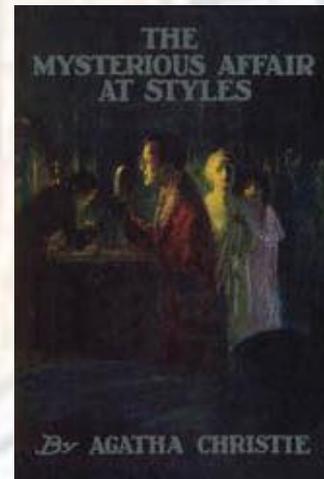
Agatha Christie: The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

Biographical Note



The author was born Agatha Mary Clarissa Miller on 15 September 1890 in Torquay, Devon, in a wealthy middle class family. She grew up on children's literature of the time, and by the age of 18 had begun writing short stories herself. In 1912, she met Archie Christie, an aviator, who joined the Royal Flying Corps and served in the war. They married on Christmas Eve 1914, and lived separately until January 1918 because of the war. While Archie saw action in France, Christie herself served in the

Voluntary Aid Detachment at a Red Cross hospital in Torquay. Christie had started writing detective fiction during the war years, and had written the first Poirot novel, *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* during 1916. After being refused by several publishers, it was accepted by John Lane, founder of The Bodley Head, in 1919. Poirot was modelled on the Belgian refugees in Torquay Christie had seen during the war. John Lane accepted the novel under the condition that she would change the ending to a denouement in the library, which subsequently became a formula for her other novels. Her career took off swiftly, and she created her other detective series, Tommy and Tuppence, Superintendent Battle, as well as Miss Marple. In 1922, she and Archie went on a grand tour promoting The Empire Exhibition of 1924.

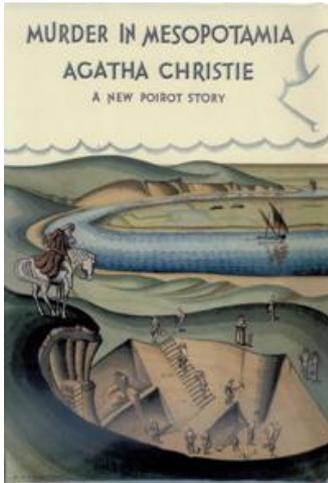


Family difficulties and problems with work had strained her relationship with Archie after their return from the tour. Christie started to write for William Collins and Sons (presently HarperCollins) and had published her first novel with them, *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926), her influential masterpiece. Christie writes in her autobiography that Lord Louis Mountbatten had suggested the plot of the novel. Archie asked for a divorce in December 1926, and Christie mysteriously disappeared for ten days, initiating a nationwide outcry and hunt. She was eventually found living at a hydropathy (hydrotherapy) hotel under a pseudonym, with no recollection of who she was. Christie herself never clarified the events of those ten days. This incident has remained a source of intense speculation for many Christie fans. The

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two eventually divorced in 1928, and Christie retained the custody of their daughter, Rosalind.

In September 1930, Christie married Max Mallowan, the British archaeologist. She had met him in 1929 at an archaeological expedition in Iraq. After marriage, the two divided their time between England and the archaeological digs. Her second marriage was a happy one and lasted until her death. The archaeological expeditions and journey in the Middle East also became a source of some of her finest Poirot works, including



Murder on the Orient Express (1934), *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936), *Death on the Nile* (1937) and *Appointment with Death* (1938). She was a prolific author, and published at least two novels every year. Her surroundings served as inspiration for her works, whether it was in other countries or the rural English countryside. In 1928, she had also adopted the pseudonym Mary Westmacott for the novel *Giant's Bread*, and she continued writing romances under this pseudonym until the 1956.

During World War II Max was stationed in Cairo, while Christie continued living and writing in England. She also volunteered at University College Hospital in London. She published some of her renowned later works such as *And Then There Were None* (1939; originally published as *Ten Little Niggers*) and the Miss Marple classic *The Body in the Library* (1942).

She continued writing prolifically after the war years, and also authored numerous plays, including *The Mousetrap* (1952), the longest running show in history. In 1971, she was made a Dame. Although her health was failing, she continued publishing Poirot, Tommy and Tuppence as well as Miss Marple stories in the 1970s. She passed away on 12 January 1956 at the age of 85 in Winterbrook, Oxfordshire.



19th century sciences and the birth of the detective novel genre

Modern detective fiction is a product of the 19th century. It relies on some very specific theories of criminality that originated in the 19th century. Moreover, these theories, and their associated scientific logic, are central to the techniques of detection employed by detectives in this genre.

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In the 19th century, criminality was explored both in terms of a physiological predisposition and a socio-psychological predisposition. Herbert Spencer's Social Darwinism, which applied the logic of the survival of the fittest to social groups, ejected its fears of criminality onto working classes and non-white racial groups. Scientists and criminologists such as Bénédict Augustin Morel (1809 – 1873) in France, and Cesare Lombroso (1835 – 1909) in Italy advanced their theories of criminality within the logic of degeneration, which explained criminality as devolution and deviancy. Lombroso, for instance, drew upon long standing traditions of physiognomy and phrenology, some dating back to the 18th century (for instance the work of Kaspar Lavater and Comte de Buffon), to argue for a typology of criminal types based entirely on the physical features of humans. In the landmark work, *The Criminal Man* (1876), Lombroso describes his eureka moment, when he discovers the particular depression on the head which allows him to recognize criminality as an inherited trait, and he pronounces the criminal as an "atavistic being who reproduces in his own person the ferocious instincts of primitive humanity and the inferior animals." (Lombroso-Ferrero and Lombroso, xv). The markers of these criminal traits were visible markers available in the structure of the face, the skull and the body itself, which a scientist, or a detective skilled in the sciences, could read. While the influence of phrenology had waned, it nonetheless survived in this new form, which had devoted votaries in the later 19th century. Sherlock Holmes' obsession with skulls and their dimensions, as well as the ways in which the human body works attest to the influence of these pseudosciences. Even now, screen and stage adaptations of Holmes often feature L. N. Fowler's phrenology bust or a human skull, as a prop.

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BY
HERBERT SPENCER

SIXTH AND FINAL EDITION
(REVISED BY THE AUTHOR)

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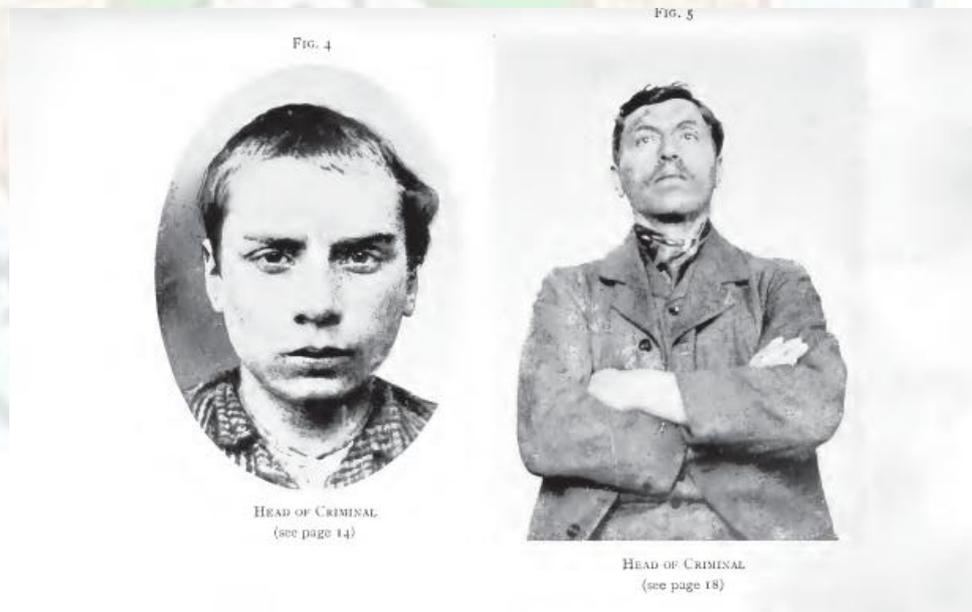
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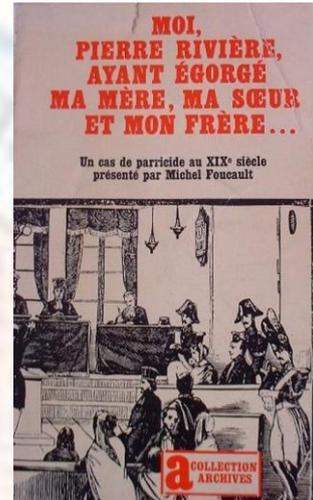


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The fears of phenomena such as “Outcast London” also led to some of the most powerful developments in criminology and forensic science, for instance, the modern method of fingerprinting, used to identify and mark the criminal subject, was developed by none other than Herbert Spencer’s acolyte, Francis Galton (1822 – 1911), who also advanced theories of eugenics to weed out traces of degeneration and atavism – and finally to eliminate other inferior races.

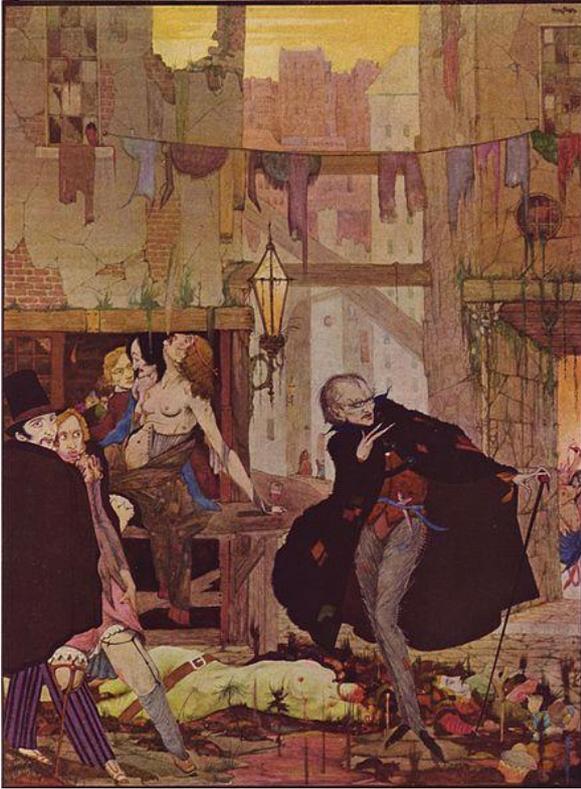


Degeneration theories also led to a shift in the understanding of criminality as an inherited tendency born not out of strength but out of physiological and psychological weakness. Michel Foucault locates the shift from a juridical to a psychiatric discourse of criminality in modernity in the 19th century, because this shift needed the underpinning of science for its presentation of criminality as a tendency beyond the will of the criminal, who could be identified early if the signs were known. Foucault’s study of the case of Pierre Rivière illuminates this aspect of modern criminology. Thus, although Holmes and Poirot seem to be on opposite ends of the spectrum when it comes to their approach to the criminal, both rely on a discourse of criminality where degeneration, class, and racial fears are inextricably intertwined. Poirot’s discussion of criminality in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, where the origins of the criminal act are located in weakness, is straight out of the books of 19th century degeneration theorists.



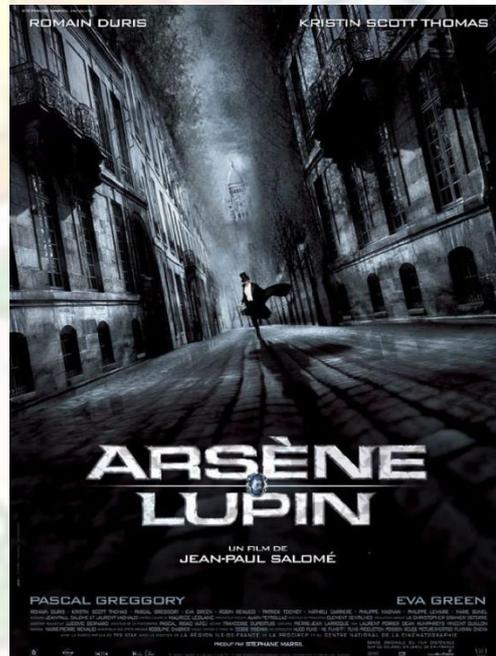
A brief history of early detective fiction

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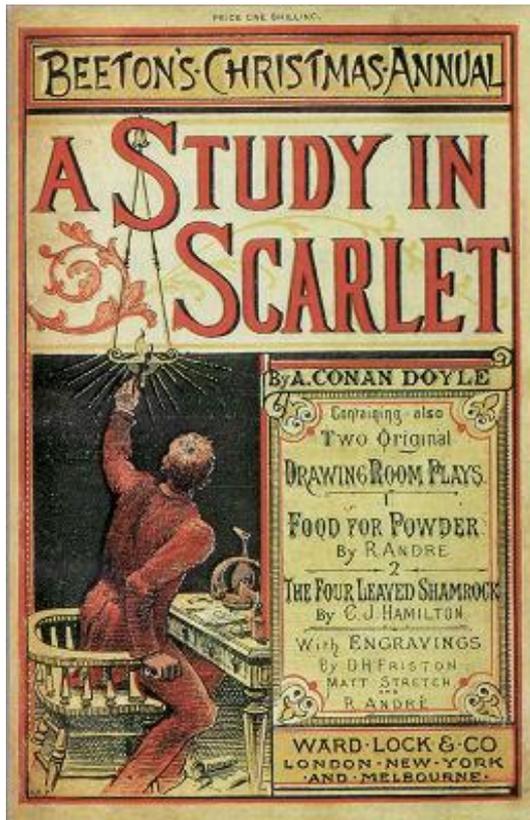
Modern detective fiction begins with the American master storyteller Edgar Allan Poe's (1809 - 1849) "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" (1841), a short story featuring Poe's detective C. Auguste Dupin, and set in Paris. Poe was a pioneer in many genres of popular fiction, including the modern horror as well as science fiction. In his stories featuring Dupin, Poe also created subsequent conventions in detective fiction, including the narrator person who records the actions of the detective, and the theme of the consulting detective. The French

writer Émile Gaboriau's (1832 - 1873) Monsieur Lecoq on the other hand is a policeman like Eugène François Vidocq (1775 - 1857), a criminal turned policeman who served as the model for both Poe and Gaboriau. Lecoq first appeared in *L'Affaire Lerouge* (1866), which featured Monsieur Tabaret, eventually coming into his own in the serialized novel *Monsieur Lecoq* (1868). Yet another French criminal, anti-hero and part detective, Arsène Lupin was created by Maurice Leblanc (1864 - 1941) at the beginning of the 20th century. Significant other works such as *The Woman in White* (1859) *The Moonstone* (1868) and were written by Wilkie Collins, while Charles Dickens left *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870) unfinished at the time of his death.



But it is with Arthur Conan Doyle's (1859 - 1930) Sherlock Holmes stories that detective fiction really took off in the English speaking world. Holmes first appeared in the Doyle novel *A Study in Scarlet*, published in 1887. Doyle went on to write 4 novels and 56 short stories featuring the detective, usually aided by the Dr. John Watson, his aide and the narrator of these tales. Doyle assimilated conventions and gave birth to the genre, including the Watson figure, as well as a combination of deductive and inductive methods (or scientific method) in reasoning. Holmes also serves as the archetype of the self-absorbed, asexual, completely logical, drug-addicted and to a certain extent

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apathetic detective figure, a man for whom solving the puzzle alone offers satisfaction. Holmes is also described as a man of science, who conducts hands on experiments on corpses, is a master chemist, and has encyclopaedic memory of crime. He is aware of and uses tools of modern criminology, including forensic sciences such as fingerprinting, and writes scientific monographs on topics such as cigarette ash. Unlike many of his successors, Holmes removes the human element from the detection of crime as much as possible, working at it instead from the perspective of facts. Nonetheless, Holmes exerted and continues to exert an influence on our notions of detective fiction, and remains widely popular over a century later.

Beyond the books, Holmes' popularity has also been cemented through a series of acclaimed films and television series – he is perhaps the most filmed character in the history of the form, from the era of silent film down to present day productions. Actors have played Holmes in different ways, including the partly goofy version played by Basil Rathbone in the 1930s and 40s, the monomaniacal and narcissist Holmes played by Vasily Livanov in the brilliant Russian adaptations directed by Igor Maslennikov, and what for many fans constitutes the definitive version of Holmes played by Jeremy Brett between

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1984 and 1994. Since the 2000s, new portrayals of Holmes have made it screen, including the Steampunk played by Robert Downey Jr., the modern version played by Jonny Lee Elementary (where Lucy Liu is the Watson: Joan Watson), and the BBC featuring a 21st century Holmes starring Cumberbatch.

In the early decades of the 20th century, the detective novel merged with the crime thriller to produce the "hard-boiled" genre. While himself continued to write Holmes adventures until the mid 1920s, and Holmes was no stranger to physical action, the

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pulps came to be dominated by action-oriented fiction. Characters such as Rex Stout's (1886 – 1975) Nero Wolfe and Archie Goodwin, Georges Simenon's (1903 – 1989) Inspector Maigret, Dashiell Hammett's (1894-1961) Sam Spade, Erle Stanley Gardner's (1889 – 1970) Perry Mason, and Raymond Chandler's (1888-1959) Philip Marlowe were thus the product of a formula laid down in Holmes' stories, although they were very different in temperament. They brought to the Victorianism of Holmes the toughened modernity, sexuality, and energy of American and European crime fiction, including influences from crime comics. G. K. Chesterton's (1874 – 1936) Father Brown, is perhaps the most significant exception to the rule. Father Brown is the antithesis of Holmes. A Catholic priest who constantly fumbles with his umbrella and seems ridiculous in bearing, Father Brown solves crimes by working out the criminal's motives rather than the way in which the crime had been conducted. While Agatha Christie's Poirot shares many features of Holmes, including his egocentrism and narcissism, he is perhaps closest to Father Brown in terms of method.

However, it was in detective fiction written by women in the early 20th century that we find some of the best exemplars of the genre. The "big four," comprising Agatha Christie, Dorothy L. Sayers (1893 – 1957), Margery Allingham (1904-1966) and Ngaio Marsh (1895-1982) dominated more traditional forms of the fiction. Christie created several remarkable detective figures, including Hercule Poirot (1920 – 1975) and Miss Jane Marple (1926 – 1971) remain the most famous.

"Why not make my detective a Belgian? . . . I could see him as a tidy little man, always arranging things, liking things in pairs, liking things square instead of round. And he should be brainy—he should have little grey cells of the mind."

—Agatha Christie,

from An Autobiography



Hercule Poirot, the detective in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, first appears in *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* (1920), and last appears in *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* (1975). Poirot appeared in 33 novels by Christie, and is one of her most popular detectives. Dorothy L. Sayers created Lord Peter Wimsey; Allingham produced Albert Campion ; and Marsh created Chief Inspector Roderick Alleyn. This period, which is sometimes known as the Golden Age of detective fiction, saw some of the classic detective fiction tropes become routinized and crystallized into the modern genre, including the "whodunit," and the "country house murder," and it was through the work of these writers that the genre was shaped.

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Genre, Golden Age detective fiction, and the formula

Unlike many other genres, detective fiction is perhaps stricter in terms of its generic parameters. James Gunn for instance, points out how science fiction is a hybrid genre, there can be a science fiction story which is a detective story, a romance, a western, war fiction, historical fiction and so on. Detective fiction, on the other hand, seems to follow certain basic rules. In 1929, Ronald Knox produced his "Ten Commandments for Detective Novelists" for the Detection Club, which had members such as Chesterton and Sayers. Simplified, the rules are as follows:

1. The criminal must be someone mentioned in the early part of the story, but must not be anyone whose thoughts the reader has been allowed to follow.
2. All supernatural or preternatural agencies are ruled out as a matter of course.
3. Not more than one secret room or passage is allowable.
4. No hitherto undiscovered poisons may be used, nor any appliance which will need a long scientific explanation at the end.
5. No Chinaman must figure in the story.
6. No accident must ever help the detective, nor must he ever have an unaccountable intuition which proves to be right.
7. The detective must not himself commit the crime.
8. The detective must not light on any clues which are not instantly produced for the inspection of the reader.
9. The stupid friend of the detective, the Watson, must not conceal any thoughts which pass through his mind; his intelligence must be slightly, but very slightly, below that of the average reader.
10. Twin brothers, and doubles generally, must not appear unless we have been duly prepared for them.

These ten rules seem to constrain detective fiction to a set of rules, however, detective fiction often emerged precisely in opposition to these rules. Where Knox suggests fair-play so as not to trick the reader, who would, ideally, figure out the criminal together with the detective, authors often used devices that broke these rules. Christie's *Roger Ackroyd* playfully breaks the very first rule for instance, as well as the ninth rule. The structure of the traditional detective novel is like a jigsaw puzzle. The creation of the puzzle begins with the conclusion, the whole is then divided into parts that exist to be rearranged. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the puzzle begins with the murder, and pieces are slowly arranged and rearranged to retrieve the true picture and reveal the identity of the murderer, the solution of the puzzle. Associated with each piece of the puzzle is suspense and with the progress of the narrative an excitement. The underlying factor is fair play, and the reader must have confidence that eventually all the pieces will

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fall into place or else he will refuse to play the game. The whole process is a pattern that is invoked in each work of detective fiction: the key to the success of an individual work lies in the manner it can keep the reader guessing the identity of the reader to the last pages of the narrative.

In her essay on Golden Age detective fiction, Susan Rowland identifies some common features in Golden Age, or classical detective fiction. As "clue-puzzles," these entertain the reader without actually posing a threat. She identifies a high degree of self-referentiality in the classic detective novel. The genre detective of earlier fiction looms against the travails of the fictional detective of the new order, with whom the audience forms a bond and with whom they participate in the chase. Rowland also notes a conscious feminization of the detective figure:

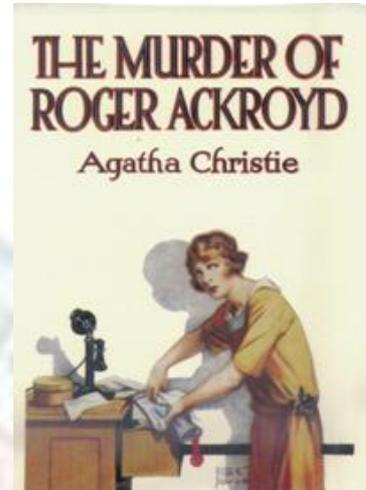
"the rotund Hercule Poirot, delicate Wimsey and morally role - playing Campion and Alleyn constitute a significant modification of the self - contained male rationality that the novels attribute to Holmes. Golden age detectives detect as much through connection and immersion in their suspects' worlds as they do through detachment and logical analysis of clues. They are intuitive and they value this intuition; they bring into the crime - solving field nonrational, emotive, so - called "feminine" methods to rank equally with hard "masculine" rationality." (Rowland 121)

Even as high modernist authors experimented with the presentation of the subconscious and memory, borrowing from the ideas of Henri Bergson, Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, through techniques such as stream-of-consciousness and tunnelling, genre fiction too adopted the interiority of the criminal psychology as a point of study.

But it is perhaps the conservatism of golden age fiction that strikes the modern reader of the genre. Golden age fiction was written between the two world wars, and thus the promise of Eden restored at the end was perhaps essential to the nature of the narrative. Thus the country-house murder mystery, with its body in the library or the study room, country folk, upper-class victims, criminals and often detectives (Lord Wimsey is perhaps the best known example), hints of scandal and skeletons in the cupboard, and finally the closed nature of the entire event in terms of locale – seeks to universalize the crime and turn the whodunit into a symbolic space of guilt and repression, whose symptoms are treated as in a psychoanalytic oneirocritical session. The village and the country serve as a pristine locale, into which the insertion of violence is resolved in order to restore the locale to its prelapsarian state. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is one of the best examples of this. Joseph Rosenblum argues that Christie deliberately keeps her locale vague in order to suggest a timeless and universal quality: "This easy transferability of her settings applies even to her most exotic locales; Mesopotamia seems no more foreign than Chipping Cleghorn. The lack of specific detail has given her works timelessness as well as universality." (324) The primary detail that is used in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* like most detective novels is the murder. In most

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detective novels, the crime is against a person because it engages the fears of the reader. Murder forces society to seek the offender. Murder is also an act of desperation, with the murderer seeking a way out of the mess he has created. The stakes are higher when the game is deadly. In thematic terms, the detective and the criminal become morality figures of good and evil in a modern milieu. One of the ways in which detective fiction connects to the reader is to recreate fundamental belief in the reader's culture. Detective novels are based on restructured mythemes such as the superiority of good over evil. These beliefs are necessary for the reader to maintain hope in the goodness of the world. The conflicts outside the little village can hardly be as easily resolved, but by removing King's Abbott from reality and making it an alternate world where the chaos can be controlled, the novel provides a temporary sense of relief to the reader. A novel like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* creates the illusion of restored order in a chaotic world.



John G. Cawelti, in the structuralist analysis of popular fiction, writes of the game dimension of formula, which is "a culture's way of simultaneously entertaining itself and of creating an acceptable pattern of temporary escape." (Cawelti, 1969). Cawelti maintains that popular fiction adheres to a formula, a framework within which each work is cast. The framework varies across genres. As popular fiction is produced for a mass audience, the expectations of the reader are put first. Each genre has a set of conventions that are established as a contract between the author and the reader such that certain expectations will be satisfied by the work of fiction. In a work of detective fiction like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the patterned experience of excitement and suspense is seen as entertainment while the resolution of conflicts in the fictional world serves as a temporary escape from the frustrations of everyday life. If there is a limitation in Golden Age fiction, it is precisely this constraint of formula.

Cawelti moreover, distinguishes between convention and invention. Conventions are created to give the reader the satisfaction of being a part of the game and familiar with its rules – the stereotyped characters and social backgrounds, accepted ideas and so on. Inventions on the other hand are elements that the reader is unused to, unique creations of the author that gives the work its originality. While conventions help to locate the reader within the work, inventions are what keeps the reader interested in the game. Inventions result in unfamiliar elements of suspense that keep the reader glued to the novel to discover its end. In an otherwise conventional plot, what gives *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* its uniqueness is the fact that the criminal is the narrator. Although it is a violation of convention, the effect that it produces on the reader is one of pleasant

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astonishment as it manages to entertain and adhere to the game dimension of entertainment. Indeed, the violation of convention is part of the contract itself – part of the game dimension that Cawelti speaks of. This is the paradox of genre – the very elements that are accepted as convention must be broken down for the genre to remain viable. *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* thus provides to the reader just what he needs from the formula of detective fiction – a right blend of invention and convention, a plot full of suspense and the sense of ego enhancement that comes as a part of winning the game. The sleepy English village setting also manages to provide the comfort of insular security that the reader expects to find in a work of detective fiction. It is not surprising that this novel remains one of the most read works of detective fiction to date, nearly ninety years after it was originally published.

Reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*: The Problem of Genre

As we have just argued, a detective novel is like a game played between the author and the reader in which the author places a large number of clues in front of the reader. The reader has to apply his logic and reasoning to discover a coherent pattern in the clues offered. In this process, the narrator figure is a recurrent structure in the detective novels – the person who walks with the reader through all the clues. Readers familiar with the genre do not think of questioning the narrator's authenticity because the Watson/Hastings figure is in many ways essential for the readers' comprehension of the progress of the narrative. In making the criminal the narrator, Agatha Christie is able to create a twist in the game dimension of the genre, give a shocking surprise to the reader, and churn out a popular novel from amongst numerous run of the mill counterparts.

In the standard detective novel where the Watson figure is used, there are two distinct channels of author-reader interaction. The first of these is through the detective focalizer. The focalizer's job is to direct the reader's attention to those clues that are central to the final solution. The other channel is through the Watson figure, the narrator who projects the questions of the reader inside the text. The reader and the narrator are in league to understand the focalizer's references to clues and his method of thinking. Poirot's references to the similarity between Hastings and Doctor Sheppard make the reader subconsciously accept him as the Watson-figure. The partnership thus formed diverts the reader's attention to what the doctor reveals about himself. Conventions in a literary genre are held as a contract between the text and the reader so that some expectations are rendered plausible and others ruled out. The Watson figure is a part of the detective story convention: a familiar character that the reader simply cannot suspect. In addition to being the narrator and the reader's walking stick through the novel, the narrator is a doctor, a respectable society man whose function is to give life

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rather than take it. A number of early reviewers felt that Christie had betrayed the readers' trust by upsetting an established convention. The runaway success that the novel had however is ample proof that the readers felt comfortable with such betrayal. This brings us to a fundamental question with regard to the genre – what is it that readers expect from a detective novel and what accounts for its popularity?

Many reasons can be advanced for the popularity of the detective fiction genre. As the underlying story in a work in the detective genre is fairly basic, even when one considers shifts in narrative strategy such as those in *Roger Ackroyd*, it could be proposed that the genre achieves its effects through repetition of this underlying story – steps towards the solution of a puzzle. In effect, one is likely to get the same satisfaction from a work in the genre as one gets when solving a particularly hard jigsaw puzzle. Other theories could be advanced, for instance from Aristotelian, Christian hermeneutic or psychoanalytic angles, such as detective fiction as catharsis, as the expression and experience of original sin through the Cain and Abel motif, or as a consistent expression of the erotic and thanatic drives. All these theories assume that there is something inherent in humans that demand the projection of guilt and punishment.

Part of it can undoubtedly be explained by the way in which Christie constructs hermeneutic gaps that the detective will eventually fill up. Part of it can also be attributed to what Auden calls the cathartic effect of detective fiction – the purgation of the reader's own guilt. But what is perhaps the most important is the surprise ending that will shock and amaze the reader who will think back and re-read the novel to discover how he/she could have been so blind. In a novel like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* where convention is harshly broken, the reader engages in a discovery and rediscovery of the detective's cleverness and the author's skill in what is otherwise a straightforward plot.

The reader's interest in a work of detective fiction is had and sustained through a control of the reader's desire to master the problem that the work is based on. At one level, the narrative seems to push towards a conclusion and a solution, but on another level the narrative endeavours to maintain the enigma in the form of misleading clues, equivocation, red herrings, suspended answers and other such retardatory devices. This is the fundamental paradox of a detective novel with respect to its plot. It is through these devices that the suspense is sustained right to the end. Christie's skilful construction of such retardatory devices and the manipulation of the reader's expectations and desire accounts for the tremendous popularity of the whodunit *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*.

That the text must be simple and intelligible in order to be read is true of almost any work of popular fiction. In the case of a detective story however, it must not be too

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simple, for then it would come to an untimely end. The text must slow down the process of comprehension to ensure its own survival. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* this slowing down is excellently done. The reader is led through a series of false clues, subplots and digressions so as to divert his attention from the actual solution. The reader will at first be mystified by a phone call, then the retired hairdresser neighbour, references to poisons, a Tunisian dagger, a piece of white cloth and most significantly, the runaway/missing stepson Ralph Paton. The reader will try to engage mentally in puzzle solving along with the narrator and detective. He will try to understand why the chair has been moved and who the mysterious stranger met by the narrator is. For all this he will form hypothesis, each to be explained in good time and possibly proved false by the detective.

Hermeneutic gaps in a work of detective fiction are mostly created through red herrings and introduction of unfamiliar new elements that are in no way connected to the central mystery. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the subplot of Ralph Paton, Ursula Bourne, Flora Ackroyd, Major Blunt and several others are created as possibly interesting but unimportant digressions if we are to consider only the central story. But these are also the pivot of the reading process because they help the author create a surprise ending to the narrative. If the reader's progress through the narrative is driven by epistemophilia, the desire to know the end, then these are essential to lead the reader away from knowing the truth on his own – he must be made to rely on Poirot's grey cells.

It is because of this that the conclusion of a detective novel becomes very important. It must be so wholly unexpected, so startling, that the reader has to place his entire trust in the way the detective arrives at the solution. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, the unique remarkable strategy that Christie employs in making the narrator the criminal is one such. The reader is so conditioned by the formula that he cannot expect such a thing to happen. The strategy is a remarkable novelty that the reader is unused to. The reader had so far identified with the narrating self, but now he is forced to detach himself from the respectable Doctor Sheppard and be at the mercy of the author. Once the solution has been reached, the detective calmly recreates the crime logically and efficiently for the emotional and intellectual satisfaction of the reader.

For the second and subsequent readings therefore, the reader's exercise is a discovery and rediscovery of the crime. Being in possession of the facts, the reader engages in an analysis in like manner to the detective, for he is the hero and the master of the situation. The need to emulate a higher ideal of logical efficiency is inherent in the consciousness of most readers, and *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* satisfied that need.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nj2U8ut_DHs

Reading *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* II: The Problem of Psychology

Agatha Christie: The Murder of Roger Ackroyd

A detective novel has traditionally been action centric in that the solution is reached through an unearthing of clues with one motive – finding the criminal. In the process, characters in these novels per se have always been subordinated to the spheres of action within which their performance can be characterised – hero, villain, victim, suspect, innocents. Characters merely move from one sphere of action to another – from a suspect to an innocent for example. In *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, owing to the fact that the criminal is the narrator, it is not the criminal but the workings of the criminal mind that become the focus through the progress of the narrative.

There are two ways in which the incidents are brought to the perspective of the reader. One has been through the narrator focalizer and the other through the detective focalizer. Due to the way in which the narrative is constructed and the conventions of the genre to which the reader is habituated, the reader assumes that he and the narrator/Watson figure are in league to understand the detective's actions. While at one level it is indeed so, the difference of motive that lies between the narrator's interest in the detective's action and the reader's interest in the same generates a significant psychological conflict when the mystery is solved. The reader is left alone without the support of the person he has relied on throughout the narrative and considered above suspicion.

The narrator criminal is also the detective's assistant, for which reason Poirot's method of detection relies on psychological analysis. He cannot hide clues from the assistant as easily as his knowledge of criminal psychology. Halfway through the novel, before he can establish it empirically, Poirot tells Doctor Sheppard that he knows the identity of the murderer. Poirot does not act at this stage however. He has deduced the murderer's identity through his knowledge of human nature. Poirot goes on to give an elaborate lecture on the nature of the criminal in this particular case before Caroline and Doctor Sheppard. In this lecture, Poirot reveals his methods to the reader. His reference to the weak nature of the criminal is very suggestive and it should put the careful reader on the track of the weakness of the narrator right through the novel. Because the progress of detections must necessarily be hidden from the criminal, the detective focalizer's intention is to shift the readers' attention to his method of psychological detection rather than action in the form of material clues. The reader, if he wishes to solve the crime on his own, must rely on interpretative psychological skills.

Poirot's repeated insistence on the fact that everyone has something to hide is another dimension of psychological analysis. According to W. H. Auden, the reader's interest in detective fiction is a sign of existential guilt. The reader needs to purge the guilt within himself which he achieves through the means of reading about someone else's guilt. The fact that everyone has something to hide is merely a reaffirmation of what Auden's Christian analysis discovers (Auden, "The Guilty Vicarage").

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One other fact that separates *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* from the action variety of detective novels is that Poirot is in his late seventies in this particular adventure, as Anne Hart, Poirot's 'biographer,' notes in *The Life and Times of Hercule Poirot*. The septuagenarian detective Poirot, unlike Holmes or other detectives in the pulp mode such as Dashiell Hammett's (1894-1961) Sam Spade, leaves much of the legwork to his assistant Doctor Sheppard (in this Sheppard is perhaps not unlike Archie Goodwin, the assistant of Nero Wolfe, another contemporary of Poirot), while he can engage in the relaxed puzzle solving of the armchair detective.

Thus much of the action and puzzle solving in *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* is psychological. Christie manages to successfully distance her novels from the detective novels that rely more on the investigation of clues. Christie, writing during the World War years also manages to retain that element that structures the pristine detective novel – suspense, while separating it from the genre that the action variety of novels metamorphosed into – the spy thriller.

Conclusion

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd occupies a very special spot in the history of detective fiction. By challenging the conventions of detective fiction by placing the criminal as narrator, it paved the way for a more self-conscious detective fiction with metafictional qualities, including stylized postmodernist detective and crime narratives such as Paul Auster's *New York Trilogy* (1985-1986), Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), and Orhan Pamuk's *My Name is Red* (1998) and Jose Saramago's *The Double* (2002). However, it could also be considered in many ways the early farewell to the conventions of Golden Age fiction, because it transforms the reader's position vis-à-vis the novel from a secure confidante of the narrator who shares the abhorrence of crime to a reader whose own guilt is revealed as the pleasure of experiencing a murder vicariously. The reader is effectively abandoned in a world of crime without any certainty.

It is unsurprising then, that with novels such as *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, in detective fiction, Poirot's stature is right after Holmes himself. Unlike Holmes however, Poirot has rarely been reinvented – the long running ITV series featuring David Suchet as Poirot retains the ambience of Christie's novels. Suchet's portrayal, like Brett's for Holmes is also perhaps the definitive one, since it covered every single story featuring Poirot written by Christie. At its conclusion in 2013 then, the time for modernized versions of Poirot has finally arrived.

Glossary

Hydrotherapy: A form of medical treatment which uses water for the treatment of diseases, particularly for alleviating pain.

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Social Darwinism: A form of pseudo sociology, highly influential in the 19th century, which drew upon Darwinian theory of evolution as survival of the fittest to create a model of society where the strongest (in terms of class and race) would survive and the weaker would perish. They advocated different kinds of social policies for advancing this goal.

Degeneration: The darker side of Darwinism, degeneration was a set of complex arguments that held that human evolution tended to favour regress rather than progress, that the current generation was less physically capable than the previous one, and that technology and industrialization, for instance, in its numerous manifestations, had produced biologically (mentally and physically) weaker children.

Atavism: Regression into a previous type. For instance, the birth of a child with a tail is considered an example of atavism. This usually tied into theories of degeneration.

Phrenology: A pseudo-science, which, along with physiognomy was highly popular in the late 18th and early 19th century. The skull was seen to reflect the specific development of parts of the brain, and the parts were associated with specific characteristics. Phrenology used measurements in the human skull, particularly depressions and elevations on the bone structure, as well as size of certain areas, as proof of certain propensities and character traits.

Eugenics: A pseudo-science that grew out of Social Darwinism, eugenics is the promotion, through breeding, of specific, "superior," traits in humans, and elimination of other, "inferior" or "degenerate" traits. Eugenics is one of the key components of scientific racism, and was widely used by both Nazis and their detractors, to advance white supremacist and other racial theories.

Hard-boiled: A genre of crime fiction, very popular in the interwar years, featuring larger-than-life tough protagonists, who, faced with the ruthlessness of the world of crime on the one hand and corruption and untrustworthiness on the other are typically antiheroes who live life by their own rules. The hardboiled detective is in many ways similar to the antihero of the Western, born of the materialism of a new world that challenges the use of old world values.

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Whodunit: Or "Who Done It", a form of detective fiction in which the principal objective is to locate the perpetrator of a crime, usually by following clues, along with the detective.

Golden Age fiction: The term used for detective fiction written in the decades between 1920 and 1950.

Country-house murder: A form of detective fiction which is usually set in a house in the country, away from the city, which allows the elaboration of a typical whodunit due to its closed nature. The country house murder story, for instance *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, was particularly important in Golden Age fiction.

Self-referentiality: A form of fiction which make reference to itself as fiction, for instance, if a detective fiction refers to itself as detective fiction. It is quite common in both hardboiled fiction as well as Golden Age fiction.

Oneirocritical: Involving the interpretation of dreams, typical of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalysis.

Prelapsarian: Referring to the Biblical myth of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden, the prelapsarian (before the fall) state is the state of perfection and innocence.

Mythemes: A term popularised by Claude Levi-Strauss, mythemes are the smallest units of myth, which could also be identified as the underlying function common to different myths, for instance, the idea of death and resurrection (common to harvest myths), the battle between good and evil (common to different hero myths) and so on.

Focalizer: A term used by Gerard Genette to refer to the perspective from which the narrative is presented. It is a subjective position.

Hermeneutic gaps: Gaps in the story that make it impossible for the reader to solve the crime on his or her own. These are gaps in interpretation and narrative, rather than the disclosure of clues.

Epistemophilia: The desire for knowledge, or the desire to know the end.

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List of visuals used

1. Photo of Agatha Christie
(Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Agatha_Christie.png)
2. Book cover: *The Mysterious Affair at Styles*.
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3. Book cover: *Murder in Mesopotamia* (1936)
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4. Agatha Christie's tombstone
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5. Title page of Herbert Spencer's *First Principles*
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6. Image from Gina Ferrero-Lombroso and Cesare Lombroso's *Criminal Man*, pg. 51
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10. *Arsène Lupin* (2004 film) , film poster (low resolution for fair use)
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11. Cover: *A Study in Scarlet* by Arthur Conan Doyle, the first Holmes novel
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12. Jeremy Brett as Holmes in the Granada TV series
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13. David Suchet as Poirot in *Agatha Christie's Poirot* (ITV Programme, low resolution for fair use terms) (http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:DavidSuchet_-_Poirot.png)
14. Book cover: *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* (1926)
http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:The_Murder_of_Roger_Ackroyd_First_Edition_Cover_1926.jpg

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