



The World of Mystery and Crime: Agatha Christie Techniques

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Abstract:

And Then There Were None and *A Murder is Announced* are two prominent works written by the “Queen of Crime” Agatha Christie. While both novels belong to the genre of the murder mystery and detective fiction, the writer employs different literary techniques to build suspense and keep the readers’ engagement until the final scene. Moreover, Agatha Christie also pays great attention to the details of the crime. Providing the audience with certain clues, the writer succeeds to manipulate the reader’s thoughts. Thereby, *And*

Then There Were None and *A Murder is Announced* are remarkable examples of the murder mystery that is achieved by different literary means making the stories topical literary works.

Keywords: *Agatha Christie, crime, detective fiction, murder, mystery.*

Introduction

The writing techniques Agatha Christie applies in her stories distinguish her among other authors. Being named the “Queen of Crime” and “The Queen of Suspense,” the author always used a simple writing style for every reader to understand her literary works. Although simple in style, Christie’s fascinating plots challenged the audience to realize who was the main villain in the story. At the same time, the author’s selective approach to the material allowed the reader to move slowly through the story that enhanced the drama. Moreover, the writer depended heavily on dialogue, a technique she applied to develop her characters as well as intensify suspense. With short sentences, witty dialogue, crime details, and diversionary tactics, the writer created the mystery of the murder. Therefore, *And Then There Were None* and *A Murder is Announced* are two fiction stories where the writer masterfully employs such literary techniques as a plot, narrator point of view, foreshadowing, figurative language, and the

female detective in the latter to create the murder mystery.

And Then There Were None

First published in 1939, *And Then There Were None* does not lose its interest till present days. Indeed, the novel remains Christie’s bestselling literary work that has been made into several plays and movies (Birns, 2012, p. 1). Similarly to other famous literary works of the author, the novel has been written in the first half of the 20th century. While the writer served as a military nurse in both World Wars, she used her experience to raise the question of life and its sanctity. Seeing the horrors of death, Christie attempted to establish a right moral order within her fiction stories (Willis, 2005, p. 16). In this respect, the author chose the murder mystery and detective fiction genre can be regarded as the best way to achieve this purpose. Some critics claim that the audience of the time required a world of justice and moral order that has been challenged by the events of the World Wars



(Kalaidjian, Roof, & Watt, 2003, p. 1126). In her literary works, Agatha Christie offered this moral vision. At the same time, her fiction is also characterized by original plot twists and specific attention to details that keeps readers' interest and engagement till the end of the story.

Like her other literary works, *And Then There Were None* is written in the genre of the murder mystery and detective fiction. In this genre, the story concentrates on a crime or series of murders and its investigation. Although the author offers clues and hints on the identity of the criminal, the actual truth can be hardly discovered by the reader until the very end. In *And Then There Were None* as well as in other works of the particular genre, the ending suggests the criminal's identity, his motivations, and the method used for committing the crime (Stoddard, 2005, p. 35). Moreover, the ending of the fiction story almost always discloses a logic behind the events and small pieces of evidence that the reader might not notice within the text. *And Then There Were None* fits into the specific category of detective fiction. However, the novel lacks a clear protagonist depicting characters who are free from the prosecution of their crimes. At the same time, the story was originally titled "Ten Little Niggers" and was issued under that title in Great Britain (Bouchard, 2008, p. 1). This title evoked racial question in America where the novel was renamed "Ten Little Indians" (Bouchard, 2008, p. 1). Although Christie's novel has been criticized for its racial references and the author's racism towards minorities, it has not challenged its popularity among the readers.

And Then There Were None is a thrilling and mysterious story about ten people who have been invited to an island for the weekend. Although all the characters harbor a secret, none of them suspect the reason of being selected for the particular vacation. In the house, the group is introduced to the butler and the housekeeper who tell them about the host, Mr. Owen. Unsuspected for potential danger, the guests enjoy the dinner and their time in the house. However, after listening to a gramophone recording, it becomes obvious that each of the characters has participated in some kind of

murder. Moreover, none of them have been charged or imprisoned for the crime they committed in the past. Suddenly, one by one, Christie's characters begin to die under unexplained circumstances. One of the group indicates an analogy between the first guest's death and the beginning of the nursery rhyme, "Ten Little Indians". The drama of the story increases when the diminishing group becomes aware of the fact that one of them is a mad man who intends on killing them all. Thus, the fiction forces the reader to ponder on a person who created such a sinister plan.

Christie's novel can be regarded as an ideal combination of thriller and detective story. To create the mystery in *And Then There Were None*, the writer employs different literary techniques such as plot, narrator point of view, foreshadowing, details of crime, and figurative language. Moreover, the author also refers to the poem "Ten Little Indians" as the key component of her mystery novel that allows to create the puzzling crime as well as gives clues to the identity of the killer (Bouchard, 2008, p. 2). At the same time, the poem determines how each character on the island dies. Furthermore, Christie's intelligence and intricate emotions can be observed throughout the novel (Bouchard, 2008, p. 2). Raising the question of justice, the writer creates the story where the desperate battle between guilt and retribution occurs. Thus, *And Then There Were None* is filled with complex deceptions that allows the author to manipulate readers' mind and feelings. Additionally, the above mentioned techniques do not only contribute to the murder mystery, but also make it more difficult for the audience to solve the main mystery. Leaving the reader shocked and confused, Agatha Christie strengthens his or her desire to investigate the murderer's identity.

And Then There Were None is distinguished by its plot, which is the greatest technical achievement of the author. Indeed, the plot of the novel greatly contributes to the creation of tension within the fiction towards the final scene where the two characters confront each other before the unexpected ending of the story. Thus, the exposition of the novel is the arrival of ten

strangers on Indian Island. The characters are excited about the reason of this journey to the unknown place as well as the host who invited them. Furthermore, the rising action of the story follows promoting the establishment of tension. Thus, a mysterious recording sounding from nowhere and accusing each of the group of committing a murder moves the plot and makes the story even more thrilling. Although the guests try to keep calm, they all attempt to figure out which of them is the villain. The situation becomes complicated when a series of deaths occur as well as Indian figures also disappear. The suspense reaches its climax when Vera and Lombard find the dead body of Dr. Armstrong. Thus, one of them must be the killer because there is nobody on the island except them two. Moving the dead body out of the water, Vera takes the gun from Lombard's pocket and shoots him to protect herself. Returning to her room, the woman hangs herself just like the last Indian in the poem. The falling action leaves ten dead bodies and no hint on who actually committed these murders. Nevertheless, denouement of the novel clarifies everything for the audience. In epilogue, the readers learn that Justice Wargrave is the killer who murdered all the characters in the name of justice. Thereby, the plot supports the establishment of the murder mystery in Christie's fiction story.

Furthermore, to create the mystery within her story, the writer employs internal dialogue and character interaction. Indeed, the reader discovers characters' thoughts and doubts due to the third person limited omniscient point of view. The author refers to the specific narrative style in order to tell the story from the perspective of a person who does not appear in the novel and thus can provide the audience with a trustful insight into a single character's thoughts (Herman, 2002, p. 56). While the writer maintains third-person limited omniscient point of view, the focus constantly changes with each chapter, so the reader becomes acquainted with all the guests individually. For instance, when Miss Brent and Vera prepares breakfast, the reader gets a glimpse into the internal dialogue of the former, "This girl didn't understand! Emily wasn't afraid, naturally – none of the

Brents were afraid." (Christie, 2011b, p. 193). Thus, narrative point of view supports the reader to understand characters' fears and guilt without allowing to see the actual killer. This narrative technique also contributes the development of drama and mystery throughout the story. For example, when the travelers listen to the record, they all seem to be confused. However, the audience discovers that each character has some lingering doubts about level of their guilt (Stoddard, 2005, p. 35). Additionally, Christie employs foreshadowing throughout the story to strengthen the suspense. The audience expects something sinister is about to happen when Vera sees the island from across the sea, "there was no house visible, only the boldly silhouetted rock with its faint resemblance to a giant Indian's head. There was something sinister about it. She shivered faintly" (Christie, 2011b, p. 21). Hence, the threatening first impression of Indian Island warns the reader of the potential danger.

At the same time, Christie saturates the novel with details and pieces of evidence to confuse and thus manipulate the audience's thoughts. In this respect, the title of the book *And Then There Were None* can be regarded as the main clue the author provides the readers with. Although the writer introduces the audience ten characters, the book title hints that none of them survive till the end. Hence, the entire novel forces the reader to ponder either who will die next or who stands behind all the murders. Moreover, the poem "Ten Little Indians" is one more powerful clue on the characters future fate. The particular rhyme hangs in each person's bedroom in a frame, but none of them pay serious attention to it until the first death occurs. Furthermore, the crime details also have a significant role in building the murder mystery. Instead of describing the killer moving through the night and planning his ominous affair, Christie strengthens the suspense by depicting soldier figurines that accidentally disappears. After Anthony's death, Rogers tells Dr. Armstrong, "There's only eight, sir! Only eight. It doesn't make sense, does it? Only eight..." (Christie, 2011b, p. 96). Thus, the writer makes a parallel between the nursery rhyme and the figurines contributing to the mystery of the book. In this

regard, Christie indicates that characters are in great danger because somebody has started a sociopath game against them.

Additionally, the writer widely uses figurative language within the novel in order to build the mystery. To be precise, Christie constantly refers to such literary devices as idioms, simile, and metaphor. Constant use of idioms can be explained by the time the story has been written. Thus, the author enriched the language of his characters with literary expressions to strengthen suspense within the scene or manipulate the readers' understanding of the plot. For example, a red herring in "His disappearance is just a red herring across the track..." draws away the reader's attention from the real facts thus making it impossible to guess who is the killer (Christie, 2011b, p. 247). At the same time, employing simile, the author creates animal images that become more powerful as the story progresses. For instance, describing Rogers, the writer states "He was like a cat on hot bricks" (Christie, 2011b, p. 100). Hence, Christie wanted to emphasize that the character felt himself uncomfortable in the particular situation. In addition, the use of metaphor also contributed to the creation of murder mystery. In Chapter 12, Christie (2011b) compares the murderer to a playful animal, "He's a playful beast" (p. 203). Thus, the author states that the killings of characters on the island is regarded as a game. Consequently, figurative language supports the creation of suspense and mystery in the book.

A Murder is Announced

A Murder is Announced is one more example of the murder mystery. Being issued in June 1950, the story drew attention of the general public. Hence, the story was serialized in the *Daily Express* in 1950 (Rosenblum, 2008, p. 112). At the same time, the story contains a fantastic hook that adds Christie's work novelty. Indeed, using an announcement in Chipping Cleghorn Gazette, the author speaks of the customs of the time. In the first half of the 20th century, people greatly valued newspapers and thus always read them, "Most of the inhabitants of Chipping Cleghorn eagerly opened the Gazette and

plunged into the local news" (Christie, 2011a, p. 5). In this respect, it is obvious the writer chose the advertisement in the news column as an original means to surprise the reader as well as build suspense from the beginning of the narrative. Furthermore, Christie's experience of a military nurse also found its reflection in the book (Kalaidjian, Roof, & Watt, 2003, p. 1127). To be precise, Colonel Easterbrook is said to have served in India. Moreover, Mitze is a post-war refugee who shares her horrible experiences. Thus, the author touches upon the war theme in the story. In addition, the image of Miss Marple also contributed to the creation of the mystery murder. Although the writer accidentally involves Miss Marple in her detective fiction, the character becomes the main investigator of the crime. Employing her distinctive method, specifically suspicion of everyone, Miss Marple assesses facts as she sees them without making early ripening judgments. Finally, a rich life experience helps the detective to pay attention to details that allows Christie to create original plot twists in order to keep readers' interest throughout the novel

A Murder is Announced begins with a mysterious advertisement in the local newspaper of Chipping Cleghorn that reports a forthcoming murder. Although the advertisement consists of accurate date and time of the murder, the neighbors do not take it seriously. On the contrary, the townspeople think it is the invitation to a game. The hostess of the house indicated in the announcement makes all the necessary preparations to meet the quests. When the Friday comes, a man with a torch appears and orders the quests to put their hands up. Suddenly, a shot sounds and when the lights are returned, the man with a gun is dead. The investigation begins, but the police close the case claiming it has been a suicide. However, the Inspector Craddock does not except the idea of an accidental death and starts his own investigation bringing Miss Marple to his research. As a result, the two learns new facts about the shot man, Rudi Scherz, and Letitia Blacklock, the hostess of the house where the murder occurs. Thereby, the story plot is filled

with twists and unpredictable situations strengthening the readers' suspense.

Compared to *And Then There Were None*, *A Murder is Announced* also perfectly fits the definition of the murder mystery and detective novel. Building suspense from the very start of the narrative, the writer skillfully maintain it until the final revelation. Christie's attention to details of crime reinforces the mystery forcing the reader to engage in the investigation Miss Marple conducts (Rowland, 2001, p. 88). At the same time, the author builds the mystery within the story through the variety of literary techniques. For instance, Christie employs an ingenious plot offering the reader different clues to manipulate his consciousness. Moreover, the writer uses narrator point of view to establish the mystery throughout the story (Palmer, 2004, p. 34). Contrasted to *And Then There Were None*, the main villain in *A Murder is Announced* is a weak and kindly killer who's initial intend is not the desire of justice, but a pursuit of monetary benefit. The author also develops the murder mystery through foreshadowing and figurative language adding to the story both wise and witty nature. Nevertheless, the main tool the author employs to increase the suspense within the narrative and thus create the mystery of murder is her main character, Miss Marple, who has become the writer's favorite female detective.

In comparison to *And Then There Were None*, *A Murder is Announced* can be recognized by its original plot. Indeed, the author created tension from the beginning of the novel depicting a mysterious announcement in the local newspaper. In this respect, the exposition of the narrative can be regarded the advertisement all the townspeople read in Chipping Cleghorn Gazette. Although the news openly claims about the upcoming murder, all the residents take it as somebody's joke or amusing invitation for a party. Then, the rising action of the story proceeds contributing to the creation of the murder mystery. When all the guests come to Miss Letitia's Victorian house, they enjoy the visit and wait for the game to start. Thinking that the man with a torch showing up in the door is a part of the game, the guests do not take his command seriously. However, the situation

becomes complicated when the man is found shot and the hostess of the house is injured. The suspense comes to the climax when Miss Marple gathers all the guests together in Miss Letitia's dwelling where both the detective and the Inspector conduct intensive interrogation. The sudden cry from the kitchen draws attention of the characters as well as contributes the story's denouement. Thus, the plot in Christie's novel does not only support the creation of dramatic tension, but also surprises and shocks the audience creating the murder mystery.

In *A Murder is Announced*, the writer uses third person limited omniscient narrator that enable the reader to have an extensive view of the events. Indeed, the third-person narrator allows the audience to learn more about the characters and their life. For example, this point of view introduces the dwellings of the different residents of Chipping Cleghorn providing the readers with information that one household or character knows. Furthermore, these hidden details that the detective and other townspeople might not know allows Christie to manipulate the reader's thoughts as well as restrain him from guessing who is the actual killer (Herman, 2002, p. 33). In this respect, the audience learns only that information the author wants them to know. For instance, the audience studies that revolver of Colonel Easterbrook has disappeared before Craddock learns this information. At the same time, the reader knows things that the Inspector discovers before other residents of the town. Although the third person point of view gives the audience a broad view, it is limited by the author who deduces the mystery of the murder (Herman, 2002, p. 34). Indeed, Christie does not permit the readers to know the details of the crime. When an unnamed woman murders Miss Murgatroyd, the author does not reveal who narrows the scarf around her neck. In addition, the writer neither point on the true identity of Miss Letitia before the story ends. Thus, providing the audience with a trustful insight into the novel's events, the writer carefully manages the information the reader learns.

At the same time, the writer establishes the mystery of murder with the help of her female detective Miss Marple. Although Christie

portrays the woman as an elderly lady about 74-year-old who has no family (Wagstaff & Poole, 2004, p. 13). Thus, the woman enjoys knitting and traveling, but during her trips she is always involved into the investigation of crimes (Wagstaff & Poole, 2004, p. 14). While the old lady is interested in different mysteries, she views solving them as her hobby. In *A Murder is Announced*, the character has a significant role in creation of the mystery murder. To be precise, the woman's calmness and clear mind strengthen the suspense until the final scene of the novel (Wagstaff & Poole, 2004, p. 41). Although the woman is not confident about her intelligence concerning crime solving, she masterfully succeeds in every case she investigates, "Really, I have no gifts – no gifts at all – except perhaps a certain knowledge of human nature" (Christie, 2011a, p. 128). Furthermore, the character tends to show her excitement about the crime when she gets to the place the incident has occurred, "I'm afraid you must think me sadly curious, Miss Blacklock – but it really is so very exciting – just like something one reads about in the paper – I'm just longing to hear all about it and to picture it all" (Christie, 2011a, p. 172). Thus, Miss Marple's cleverness and excitement about details support the woman to investigate the truth, as well as engage the reader till the end of the book.

In addition, Christie creates the murder mystery employing literary devices and figures. For instance, in the second chapter, the author employs allusion that refers to circumstance from an external context, specifically the Nazis. One of the townspeople, Mitzi, is extremely paranoid about the murder that occurred at Miss Blacklock's house. Thus, the woman wants to leave because she believes that Nazis wanted to kill her, "My enemies. The Nazis! They find out I am here here. They come to kill me?" (Christie, 2011a, p.16). This parallels to the World Wars does not only emphasize the historical background, but also the horrors of the murder. Hence, Christie aggravates the readers' awareness of death. Moreover, the writer also uses foreshadowing providing the reader with some clues. When Mrs. Harmon states "People in the dark are quite different, aren't they?" he

unconsciously hints on the actual killer who might look different in the dark room if she has been there (Christie, 2011a, p. 285). Thereby, employing figurative language, the writer masterfully manipulates the readers as well as makes the necessary emphasis on the important details.

Conclusion

To conclude, both *And Then There Were None* and *A Murder is Announced* are remarkable examples of the murder mystery and detective fiction. Using her personal experience as the military nurse during the World Wars, the writer refers to the theme of deaths and murders to shed the light on the horrible truth. Nevertheless, Christie's novels are clever and witty that make them very popular among the readers. To create the mystery of murder, the author employs different literary techniques, among which the plot, narrator point of view, figurative language, and Miss Marple character can be distinguished. Additionally, Christie masterfully manages details and clues she offers the readers strengthening the dramatic tension and restricting them from revealing the actual killer until the end of the novel.

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