

# A STUDY ON THE DETECTIVE STORY

## I. INTRODUCTION

"Agatha Christie is the most widely published writer of any time and in any language. Only the Bible and the plays of Shakespeare have sold more edition than the murder mysteries".

One could ask, after reading the fragment quoted, a simple question: "Why?" and we believe that the answer to this question would make an eloquent introduction to the present paper.

The XX-th century is coming to an end. Literature worldwide has experienced all kinds of narrative structures( if we are to refer only to prose) along the time , from the total omniscience to what was called "the death of the author". There are literary works which are not accessible to every one. It is here a question of taste and also of culture. But the detective fiction has gained so wide an audience to read and most of all it is entertaining.

Such texts are a challenge for the reader who involves mentally in the solving of the mysteries.

It is therefore a chance to put your mind to work in a very pleasant way and it is also everybody's taste of adventure which finds here the atmosphere needed. Thus detective fiction becomes a refuge in the every day's agitation and worries, a place full of danger but which is safer than any other place in the real world. People have the possibility to test their abilities of reasoning, of anticipating, inferring, and drawing conclusions in spite of the fact that they have at their disposal very little material.

So, taking as key concepts some ideas: "adventure", "challenge", "reasoning", "meeting danger from the safe position of the reader", "being finally morally rewarded by the punishment of the evil", we can understand why the detective fiction has so much success since its first apparition till nowadays.

A very important thing when speaking about detective fiction is the fact that, in the end, the guilty person(s) is(are) discovered and the good always wins upon the evil.

We should not forget the fact that, although it first appeared in the XIX-th century, detective fiction flourished after the two world wars, perhaps because then people felt the need to revenge the numerous crimes which had been committed against humanity. The satisfaction of seeing a murderer punished - even if it was only in a book - was after all soothing for so many frighten and terrified souls.

## II. INFO DATA ON DETECTIVE FICTION

- **Definition**
- **Pattern**
- **General types of detective fiction**

"Detective story is a work of fiction about a puzzling crime, a number of clues, and a detective who eventually solves the mystery. In most detective stories, the crime is murder and the clues lead to or away from the solution ("Book of the world").

The pattern of most detective stories is the same, whether the tale is a novel, a novelette or a short story. The author presents the crime, the detective and several clues and suspects. The climax of the story comes when the detective reveals the criminal and tells how the mystery was solved.

Certain conventions have developed from the detective story pattern. The author is expected to "play fair" with the reader. That is, the reader should be given exactly the same information that the detective uses to find the criminal. Readers can treat the story as a battle of wits between themselves and the detective .

The detective in most of these stories is not a professional police officer, but a private consultant. For example, G.K.Chesterton's Father Brown is a priest, Rex Shout's Nero Wolfe is a gourmet and an intellectual. Fictional professional detectives include Wilkie Collin's Sergeant Cuff, John Creasey's Inspector Maigret. Romance or financial gain may be a factor in a detective story, but the main theme is the mystery and its solution.

Some of these characteristics and some others will be discussed while analysing Agatha Christie's **The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb** (in chapter III).

The detective story above mentioned belongs to the well known "Whodunnit" which is one of the 4 types of detective fiction, together with "the hard boiled detective narrative", "the police procedural", "the metaphysical detective narrative".

Whodunnit, the British detective fiction is usually a detective puzzle that presents crime exclusively as a riddle to be solved through the "Wh-" train of questions (i.e. Who, Why, How, Where, When).

The term **Whodunnit** (Who done it ?) was coined by D.Jordan in the American News of Books in 1930. It refers to a form of writing invented by Edgar Allan Poe in "The Murder of Rue Morgue" (1841).

The mystery is very important, emphasized whereas the writer must follow a set of guidelines that require fair play in the telling of the murder, presentation of the clues and the withholding of the identity of the murderer until the end.

The art of the "whodunnit" comes in the pursuit of the murderer through the skillful presentation of clues. The writer is expected to adhere to the standard of fair play. Which is, the writer must present to the reader all the clues necessary to reveal the significance of the clues. The writer can misdirect the reader by emphasizing the unimportant clues.

Margery Allingham, the mystery writer went on to single out an smaller group of essentials for a murder mystery belonging to the "Whodunnit" type in the preface of "The Mysterious Mr. Campion" (1963): a killing, "a mystery, an inquiry, and a conclusion with an element of satisfaction".

The writing of a classic whodunnit is governed by some very strict rules concerning the order of the sequences in the text: starting from a certain problem, it goes back in time, finds its roots and deals with them; then the solution of the problem is given and the guilty persons are punished.

Now let's follow these stages in one of Agatha Christie's stories, taking not only its title, but also its reading as an adventure of the mind.

### **III. Agatha Christie's: "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb"**

- Short presentation of the plot
- Why a Whodunnit?
- Narrative technique
  - Title and Plot
  - Time and Setting
  - Character Building
  - Language and Irony
- **Short presentation of the plot**

Reading a detective story becomes an adventure in itself, adventure which people search for, when stepping into its narrative structure, the plot included.

The title of the story which we are going to discuss announces "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb". The title, we must admit is quite interesting and arouses the reader's interest.

In a nutshell, the story is about the investigation of three deaths which "followed upon the discovery and opening of the Tomb of King Men-her-Ra. The series of deaths is presented by Hastings very succinctly: two archaeologists: Sir John Willard and Mr. Bleibner, excavating not far from Cairo, came unexpectedly on a series of funeral chambers. Soon after, Sir John Willard died "quite suddenly" of heart failure. The newspaper took the opportunity of reviving the old superstitions connected with the ill luck of certain Egyptian treasures. A fortnight later, Mr. Bleibner died of acute blood poisoning and a few days after, a nephew of his shot himself in New York.

At this stage of the story, Inspector Poirot's help is asked by Lady Willard whose son, Guy Willard went to Egypt to continue his late father's work. He gathers all the information he can get from Lady Willard, he informs himself about "the other members of the party" (which are: Dr. Tosswill, Mr. Schneider of the Metropolitan Museum, Mr. Harper- a young American secretary, Dr. Ames and Hassan- Sir Willard's servant). After that he decides to go to Egypt. A

week later, Poirot and Hastings arrive there, just in time to learn about another death: that of Mr. Schneider. The cause of his death: tetanus.

Poirot meets Sir Guy, then Dr. Ames whom he asks about the last death and its cause. Dr. Ames assures him that the death was due to tetanus. Poirot gives everybody the impression that he really believes in the Egyptian King's curse. Then he talks to Mr. Harper who wants to return to New York, being terrified of the latest events. He speaks to Hassan also and then to Dr. Tosswill.

A strange shadow is seen moving amidst the tents, which makes Poirot appealing to magic: he draws in the sand all kinds of diagrams around his tent, in order, he says to be protected. He asks then for a cup of tea which is brought by Hassan. After these, Hastings finds Poirot "lying back across the couch, his face horribly convulsed". He calls Dr. Ames and tells him that Poirot is dying, after having drunk the tea. But, it all proves to be a bluffing.

Poirot hasn't drunk the tea, but he mentions that he has put it in a safe place to give it to analyses. It is the moment in which Dr. Ames commits suicide by poisoning and thus the guilty man is discovered and punished. "His hand went to his mouth, a smell of bitter almonds filled the air, and he swayed forward and fell.

The final fragment of the story brings light on this case with Poirot's explanations: Dr. Ames took advantage of Sir John Willard's death and of the superstitious panic provoked and decided to kill Mr. Bleibner to take his fortune. Young Bleibner who committed suicide had left a note in which he said: "I am a leper" (Poirot asked for the information from New York). He killed himself because, as Dr. Ames had assured him, he really believed he had leper. Mr. Schneider's death is not very clear. Dr. Ames may have killed him because he suspected something or in order to enhance the rumors about the Egyptian curse.

Yet, the ending says that the case was hushed up and that "people still believe in the vengeance of a bygone king".

This is the story. What makes it a **Whodunnit** ?

The present story follows the strict rules of a classic whodunnit. The chronological order is reversed. It starts from a certain problem, in this case, the three deaths that have already occurred by the time the story begins.

The presentation of the case is made by Captain Hastings, here, a first person narrator. Then, the detective is called by one character who is related to one of the dead persons: Lady Willard. She is afraid for her son's life and asks for Poirot's help. The detective questions her and then goes to Egypt, trying to find the roots of the problem. His inquiries go back in time in his search for elucidating clues. He speaks to every person of the "party" and he even misleads the other characters (Hastings included) and also the reader, because he gives the impression that he really believes in the curse. So, together with the right clues, which the author gives, playing fair with the reader, the latter gets some false clues (or better said s/he misreads the clues s/he gets) in order to enhance the mystery.

Hastings plays in the text the role of the mislead reader and voices the readers' amazement:

<<"Dr. Ames ?" I cried, stupefied. "But I thought you believed in some occult influence?"

"You misunderstood me, Hastings. What I meant was that I believed in the terrific force of superstition. Once get it firmly established that a series of deaths are supernatural and you

might almost stab a man in broad daylight, and it would still be put down to the curse, so strongly is the instinct of the supernatural implanted in the human race.

Mystery is the most important element of a whodunnit and it is present here, being doubled by the exotic setting and its aura of superstitions.

The story becomes a battle of wits between the reader and the detective. In the end the reader is reassured of the validity of human logic in the face of strange mysteries. The text is also rewarding, enhancing the reader's trust in the moral values. When the murderer commits suicide Poirot makes an eloquent affirmation in this sense:

<<"Another victim", said Poirot gravely. "But the last. Perhaps it is the best way. He has three deaths on his head.">>

So having all these elements applied to this story, we can certainly say that it is a whodunnit.

The narrative technique of the story built in the general atmosphere of a whodunnit enlightens some very interesting aspects of the detective fiction.

Looking again at the text, this time from a narrative perspective, the title is the first which draws our attention.

Many of the titles of Agatha Christie's stories begin with "the adventure" or "the mystery" which reinforces the idea that in a whodunnit the mystery is one (perhaps the most important one of the Key elements. We may give some examples : "The Adventure of the Cheap Flat", "The Mystery of the Blue Jar", "The Mystery of the Blue Train", "The Adventure of the Egyptian Tomb".

So, the title is the first step the reader makes in the mystery of the story.

The very first phrase, a threshold phrase is also very important. It creates attention, a horizon of expectation making the readers curious, inviting them to take part in the adventures.

"I have always considered that one the most thrilling and dramatic of the many adventures I have shared with Poirot was that of the investigation into the strange series of deaths [...]"

As usually in a whodunnit, the plot is the linear one, there is only one narrative plan, although the setting of the story moves from London to the pyramids of Egypt.

Speaking of setting, it plays a very important function in the narrative structure of this story.

Being a very exotic place, Egypt not only does enhance the mystery, but its aura of superstitions is used to misdirect the readers.

The change of setting (moving from England to Egypt) is also very important because it brings a different perspective on the detective. But, we'll come back to this idea when speaking of characters.

Usually, in an Agatha Christie story, time is very precisely noted, minute by minute because it is often used as an alibi. In this story, the author places doubt on the idea of murder itself. The narrative doesn't present crimes, but "a series of deaths" and nobody needs any alibi. Therefore, time is noted only to help the reader understand the order of the events : "soon ", "a fortnight later" and "a few days afterwards", "it was a week later". So, the notation of time (or the lack of precise notation), also emphasizes the mystery, misleading the reader used to find in time an important clue.

In this story, time doesn't have the role of a clue which makes the riddle more difficult.

But inspector Poirot seems to cope very well with this situation and the reader follows his examples. Usually, the detective in a mystery story is ranking immediately below the author, after him coming the other characters and the reader, in what concerns the authority in solving the case. As the author is hidden in the text (and we'll come back to this), the detective becomes both a rival and a model for the reader.

Usually, and it is also the case here, the story presents flat characters, lacking psychological depth.

Nothing seems to affect the detective, who can see more than others can, arousing thus readers' admiration and even envy. But, as a person, he is not at all untouchable. In her **Autobiography**, Agatha Christie said that "it is very important that a detective should be an ordinary man. He should prove that everybody (not only the exceptional ones) can solve a mystery". Poirot, a retired Belgian police officer, having a high opinion of himself, doesn't feel at ease travelling by ship: <<Then he groaned. "But, oh" he lamented, "The sea! The hateful sea!">>. Other structures in the text, such as: "Poirot, the picture of misery, wilted by my side", prove that the famous detective is after all just human. And this makes us, the readers, feel good, doesn't it? This is, we believe, what the author wants.

Concerning the language, it shares the privilege of having Poirot, a retired Belgian officer who, very often uses French or just the syntax of French. This makes reading pleasant and it contributes to the humor of the text, entertaining the readers. The lamentations of Poirot is hilarious: <<"And my boots", he wailed: "Regard them Hastings. My boots, of the neat patent leather, usually so smart and shining. See, the sand is inside them, which is painful and outside them, which outrages the eyesight. And also the heat, it causes my mustaches to become limp - but limp!">>.

In this story the relation established between text, author and narrator is very interesting.

Although assuming the function of an omniscient writer, the author doesn't appear in the text. The author is completely hidden. We have yet a first narrator. The text features a speaker in the person of Hastings.

But the narrator knows very little. He is just a shadow following the detective. Just as we, readers, try to understand the latter's moves.

Hastings plays in the text the role of the reader who doesn't understand at thing (if there is someone like that).

In the end, when the case is solved, it is not the author who explains to the reader the use of the clues, but Poirot talking to a wondering Hastings. That's why we could say that detective fiction really cares for the readers' feelings, trying not to make them feel insignificant.

#### IV. Final Word

Agatha Christie proves in her **Autobiography** that she doesn't consider the detective fiction as belonging to low literature. The most important and valuable thing is, she says, the capacity of reasoning and solving puzzles, by putting clues together in a logical manner. She considers that the originality of the detective story doesn't stand in the fact the guilty person is punished, but in the way in which the writer arranges the events and builds the narrative structure.

Readers tend to agree with these ideas and expect more and more riddles to solve in a detective story. They read, taste the adventure and then come back in the real life, somewhat different than they were before.