



A Review on Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction

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Abstract. Detective fiction has been regarded as something for recreation for a long time [1, 2]. Many people believe that it is merely the subgenre or the lowbrow. However, with time going by, the status of detective fiction is changing gradually. It begins to occupy a vital position in British and American literature. Agatha Christie, the renowned British detective novelist and playwright, is a pioneer in detective fiction world. This article starts with the introduction of changing status of detective fiction. Then it is going to review the researches on Agatha Christie's detective fiction including the indispensable elements in detective fiction: suspense, ethical concerns, games, females and detective movies, hoping to gain some in-depth understanding about Agatha Christie's works.

Keywords: Agatha Christie · Detective fiction

1 Introduction

Detective fiction can be divided into two parts: one is about committing a crime and the other is about detecting a crime [1]. Therefore, detective fiction can be defined as a process of encoding and decoding. This literary genre is beloved by readers worldwide and has a long history. The origin of stories about crime and detectives can be traced back to the Bible in which Cain, the first son of Adam and Eve, killed his brother Abel and Daniel, the prophet of Hebrew, conducted the defence for the innocent women Susana [2]. As the queen of detective fiction, Agatha Christie is a prolific and inventive writer. Her detective fiction demonstrates that she has formulated her own writing genre in detective fiction, and with seemingly inexhaustible ingenuity, she is able to develop surprising variations in detective fiction world over a period of fifty years and has changed the public stereotypes to detective fiction [3]. This article will explore a detailed review on Agatha Christie's detective fiction.

2 “Elite Literature” and “Popular Literature”

It is widely accepted that the history of detective fiction starts with the publication of Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murder in the Rue Morgue* in 1841. For a relatively long time, detective fiction has always been seen as the subgenre or the lowbrow. The critic Edmund

Wilson once argued in his commentary “*Who Cares Who Killed Roger Ackroyd?*” that reading detective fiction was foolish and harmful, just like doing crosswords and smoking [4]. In 1981, Dennis Porter once defined detective fiction as “textual machine for producing thrills” [5]. Obviously, both of the statements above are controversial and one-sided. Without any doubt, detective novel is a form of popular literature. However, it should be clarified that being popular does not necessarily mean being vulgar. A good or bad literary work should not be judged solely by standards set by those authorities, but also by whether it is popular among readers [6]. Due to the fact that most works of detective fiction are best-sellers, it is unreasonable for us to categorize them as vulgar literature rashly. Minds do change as time goes by. In the latter half of the 20th century, “the marginalization of elite literature” and “the marketization of popular literature” have been irreversible [7]. Detective fiction, which converted from elite literature to popular literature, began to occupy a vital position in British and American literature. According to MLA (Modern Language Association), since 1995, the number of English monographs and academic theses related to detective fiction is approximately 1000 every year [8].

3 Suspense in Detective Fiction

Suspense is the core of detective fiction [9–13]. It can be interpreted as reader's anxiety which is completely controlled by the author [14]. In other words, since suspense helps to postpone uncovering the ending of the case, naturally, readers will be curious about the development of the story and they will be eager to find out the truth.

Agatha Christie is good at creating suspense in her detective fiction. Researches on the construction of suspense in her detective fiction have mainly been conducted from the perspective of the content [15–17]. That is to say, most scholars discuss the creation and the impacts of suspense on the basis of the plot. This is far from being desired. As a result, new insights have appeared. Discussions about suspense in Agatha Christie's detective fiction began to be combined with narratology. Some scholars explained suspense in Agatha Christie's detective fiction from the point of Gabriel Zoran's spatial narrative theory: the topographical level, the chronotopic level and the textual level [18, 19]. This is an innovation because discussions about time in fiction have occupied a privileged position for a long time. In fact, the narrative will be incomplete and simplistic if it ignores the spatial dimension [20]. For example, in *And Then There Were None*, the author Agatha Christie is not confined to the convention of linear and diachronic narrative. Instead, she focuses on spatial narrative. And this in turn affects the mystery-creation of the novel. Lin analyzed Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express* based on narrative perspective [11]. She pointed out that the narrative perspective played an important part in the striking suspense in this novel [11]. Through adopting omniscient view, the narrator subtly and selectively tells readers what happened, thus leading to the lack of key information [11]. Moreover, the narrator frequently converts her omniscient perspective to limited perspective, luring readers into a trap [11]. Both of the narrative perspectives facilitate the construction of suspense in *Murder on the Orient Express* [11]. For other researchers, Li and Wang once published two articles discussing about suspense in Agatha Christie's representative works such as *And Then There Were None*, *Death on the Nile* and *Murder*

on *the Orient Express* based on Gérard Genette's theory of narrative discourse including order, duration, frequency, mood and voice [9, 10]. For example, as for order, the events are arranged with sequential narration [9, 10]. In other words, the story starts with the introduction about the background and characters, then the case happens and it ends with the closure of the case. Agatha Christie also employs interposed narration and reductive case analysis to hide characters relationships [9, 10]. As for the duration, the internal monologues or long conversations of the characters, and the omission of important moments and key information have been discussed. Agatha Christie makes extensive use of characters' internal monologues or long conversations and tried to postpone the decoding process of the case, thus increasing the amount of time that readers spent on waiting for the final truth [9, 10]. In addition, omissions about important moments such as the moment when the crime was committed and key information such as the relationship among characters are conducive to creating suspense [9, 10]. As for frequency, the repetition of the same theme or the same occurrence helps to create special effects [9, 10]. In *And Then There Were None*, every character's evil deeds have been mentioned quite a few times through the gramophone, the conversations among different characters and the characters' internal monologues [9, 10]. This kind of repetition appears to be redundant. Nevertheless, the repetition of charges offers seemingly justifiable motives for a series of murders to the murderer, Mr. Justice Wargrave [9]. In fact, in Agatha Christie's detective fiction, a theme or an occurrence which frequently appears always provides an explanation for motives of a murder. Before the unveiling of the final truth, readers will be at a loss, wondering why this theme or this occurrence is mentioned so many times. In this way, suspense is craftily produced by the author. Some scholars also analyzed the impacts of the nursery rhyme "*Ten Little Indians*" on suspense in Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None*. This nursery rhyme appears at the very beginning of this work and readers naturally will have some doubts about it such as: Why is there a nursery rhyme? Is it related to the development of the plot? Does it have anything to do with the case? This nursery rhyme works as the major suspense in *And Then There Were None* [13, 21]. As the story unfolds, the readers will know that the death of the characters in the novel coincides with that of the ten little Indians in the nursery rhyme.

4 Ethics in Detective Fiction

The probe into ethical concerns in detective fiction is a constant topic in the literary world [22]. It is a headache what detectives should do with criminals in the gray zone. Should criminals be allowed to get away with punishments? Or should detectives bring criminal to justice? To be frank, this is truly a dilemma for detectives at any time.

Some scholars believed that ethical concerns should not be discussed in detective fiction as moralization would overshadow suspense in detective fiction [12, 14]. In other words, suspense and ethical concerns are contradictory to each other. If the writer feels guilty after creating a clever criminal and a horrible tragedy, and the reader, out of a sense of justice, wants the criminal to be exposed as soon as possible, then there will be no wonderful detective novel, and no pleasure in reading it. On the contrary, some scholars pointed out that ethical dilemmas were inevitable in detective fiction. Du and Luo supported this opinion with the help of the analysis of the detective Poirot in Agatha

Christie's writing. In *Curtain: Poirot's Last Case* published in 1975, Poirot killed the criminal Norton who was above the law and then he committed suicide. Choosing to murder the criminal is a paradox because it is ethical and unethical at the same time [22]. Poirot's suicide is a reflection of the author Agatha Christie's choice when faced with an ethical dilemma, that is, praising virtue and punishing vice [22].

Whether ethical concerns should be taken into consideration in detective fiction? Different detective writers have their own emphases. Some writers prefer to create striking plots, that is, the impressive battle between criminals and detectives; while others try to strike a balance between the cliff-hanging plot and the discussions about ethical concerns, just like Agatha Christie. Moreover, the discussion about ethical concerns in detective fiction, a relatively serious topic, further demonstrate that detective fiction can not be merely regarded as something for recreation. It is also serious to some extent.

5 Detective Fiction and Games

Unlike other types of literature, "the detective story is a game. It is more-it is a sporting event" [23]. To be more specific, detective fiction itself is a kind of game and reading detective fiction is also like playing an intellectual game. This point of view is convincing to a large degree. Within a detective story, the detective fights against the criminal, which is similar to the game of cat and mouse. When readers read a detective story, they engage themselves in the fierce competition with the intelligent detective in the detective story in an attempt to find out the final truth before the detective.

In order to maintain the fun of reading from the beginning to the end of detective fiction, an author must play fair with readers all the time. After all, any game is based on the principle of justice. The author can no more resort to trickeries and deceptions and still retain his or her honesty than if he or she cheated in a bridge game [23]. In other words, everything that is related to the case including methods of murder and the process of detection should not be based on supernatural powers but depend on reason and science. Only in this way can readers keep up with the author's arrangement of plots and obtain continuous pleasure from reading detective fiction. That is to say, the game between readers and the author can go on.

Agatha Christie's detective fiction has produced great pleasure for generations and reading her detective stories is like playing exciting games. This may explain why these detective stories have such an everlasting appeal among readers all over the world for a long time. Moreover, it is the major reason why so many people regard detective fiction as something for recreation.

6 Detective Fiction and Females

During a long period, females have failed to be the protagonists in detective fictions for many reasons such as women are often considered to be physically weaker or more emotional than men. Detective fiction, traditionally known for its emphasis on ratiocination and description about violent scenes, is considered to possess obvious "masculine features", thus serving as the ideological tool to safeguard the patriarchal society [24, 25]. However, these are stereotypes which are not convincing.

The outbreak of the two world wars have tremendously changed this unbalance. After the wars, females were no longer satisfied with their identities as housewives. Instead, they walked into the workplace and became working women. They had access to more job opportunities such as a job in the police station, the army or the intelligence agency. All of these demonstrate that female social statuses have improved to some extent. The change in the literary world is that an increasing number of female detective writers come to stage such as Agatha Christie, Dorothy Leigh Sayers, Josephine Tey. There are also more female detectives in detective fiction such as Miss Marple who has a good command of common sense in life and a thorough understanding of human nature. “All those females prove that they could not be confined to family life anymore. They can think independently and possess considerable insights just like males” [25]. In other words, women and men should be treated equally in all aspects.

Accordingly, detective movies also saw the rise of females. British and American detective movies began to pay attention to female detectives in original works and even female detective writers. For instance, the protagonist in the movies *Agatha and the Curse of Ishtar* released in 2009 and *Agatha and Midnight Murders* released in 2020 is the writer Agatha Christie herself. Women in detective movies are no longer simply described as sexy and beautiful. Instead, other merits such as unusually smart, physically strong, virtuous and considerate are employed to depict women in detective movies. This is great progress. In fact, the rise of women and the movie industry are closely related to each other. Feminism leads to the change in the movie industry and this change will enrich the researches on feminism in turn [26].

7 Detective Fiction and Movies

The prosperity of detective fiction directly leads to the production and development of detective movies [27]. This is an irreversible trend. Up to now, a number of detective fiction have been adapted to movies all over the world including Agatha Christie’s *And Then There Were None*, *Death on the Nile*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *Witness for the Prosecution*, *Evil under the Sun*, *Appointment with Death*, *Endless Night*, *The Mirror Crack’d, Murder, She Said* and etc. In fact, “many people’s first experience of Agatha Christie is not through her original works, but through adaptations of her work for film and television” [28]. This shows that movies or TV series can be more powerful than those original works in transmission.

There is no doubt that movies can not fully replicate fiction as there are some changes. In other words, the re-shooting of literary works is a reconstruction of original works [29]. Some scholars conducted researches on the comparison between Agatha Christie’s detective fictions and their screen adaptations, i.e., “the recurrent controversy between fidelity to the original works and perceived popular appeal” [28]. This means that the directors may change the original work more or less in order to cater to the audience. This opinion is reinforced by the fact that “horror, comedy, psychology and other interdisciplinary elements have been integrated into detective fiction in recent years” [27]. After all, some directors always put the audience’s needs and profits at first instead of original works. In addition, Guo discussed the differences in narrative features and characterization between Agatha Christie’s *Murder on the Orient Express* and three versions

of movies respectively released in 1974, 2010 and 2017 [27]. She pointed out that the audience's preference in different eras and the directors' personal styles both played a vital role in the re-shooting of detective fiction [27].

8 Conclusion

For a long time, detective fiction has always been regarded as something lowly and unimportant. It is apparent that this kind of opinion is one-sided and not in-depth. From "elite literature" to "popular literature", this trend attests to the viewpoint that detective fiction can no long be treated as something vulgar. Instead, it is full of artistic value and it should be paid much attention to. As one of the masters in detective fiction world, Agatha Christie has produced a number of world-renowned works. Almost in all of her works, she has done a perfect job in suspense creation such as making good use of the arrangement of plot and nursery rhymes to produce suspense. Moreover, she strikes a balance between creating the cliff-hanging plot and discussing some ethical concerns. When faced with the ethical dilemma, she chooses to praise virtue and punish vice, which is also in conformity with the values in society. Her detective fiction is a combination of recreation and seriousness. In addition, the creation of female detectives in her detective fiction and the adaptations of her works into movies both demonstrates the rise of females in society. The traditional viewpoint that women are inferior to men should be completely overturned. In a word, a review on the researches of Agatha Christie's detective fiction is of great significance, and this study could provide some in-depth understanding about the author Agatha Christie and her detective works.

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