



The Absence of the Detective: Agatha Christie's *And Then There Were None* (1939)

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Abstract ;

The field of crime and criminals, as diverse as it is, was nourished by different detective writers that flourished in a constantly changing literary atmosphere. It has exposed various mind sets from both the detective character and the criminal one, pushing the writer to break down the typical traits of the detective novel. This research attempts to show that a detective novel is never a steady platform; it is in fact a limber formula of different minds and stories which are effervescent to produce different plots to break free from the plain tone. It also sheds lights on the position of the detective character and its questionable presence in the process of the investigation. The emphasis is to be put on Agatha Christie's groundbreaking novel *And then There Were None* (1939).

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1.

Introduction:

The literary world has introduced a plethora of genres, among these creations came the detective genre garnished by mystery and suspense. Detective writing was claimed as a methodical style back in 1841; where brutality and mystery were used in a grotesque manner in Edgar Allan Poe's *The Murders in the Rue Morgue*. It is a refined field which reflects the criminal behavior of the guilty and the intellect of the detective (Frank2003).

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In a heightened sense of uncertainty and suspense between 1920-1939, this genre was immensely recognized, and therefore credited with the title of “The Golden Age”. In this period different male and female writers excelled at exposing plots and characters which mirrored their personal experiences in a hectic society. In the process, Agatha Christie, a well-known figure in this field, stood out along with her characters Hercule Poirot and Miss Marple. Christie produced a set of novels featuring her characters and using her gloomy implicit style of writing which kept on poking the reader’s curiosity and their analytical traits.

In 1945, Agatha Christie altered the definition of a detective novel by introducing a mystery work named *And Then There Were None*. By doing so, she weakened the absolute presence of the main constituents of a detective novel generally and the presence of the detective particularly.

2. Definition of the Detective Genre

Raymond Chandler affirmed, referring to the mystery genre, “Since its form has never been perfected, it has never become fixed. It is still fluid, still too various for easy classification, still putting out shoots in all directions” (quoted by Marling, 2000). He predicted its everlasting evolution and ever-changing elements. This genre has been a subject of debate and speculation among a large number of critics; each one of them attempting to provide a narrow definition and a fair rank.

The detective world reflects the dark tissue of society, that of crime and criminals. The terms mystery and detective are often used to serve the same purpose, which is to reveal a theft or a murder. Mystery tends to undergo the process from the moment it is announced to the moment it is closed. This latter is also called the “whodunnit” because the prominent factor that is delivered is the guilty or in other words the criminal, so the entire story is set to showcase a person who went out of the law. As for the detective, it focuses immensely on the course of the investigation; on other words it showcases the rough patch the story takes to reach a solution (Frank, 2003).

However, throughout the years and with more focused lenses critics came out with new altered definitions. Firstly, the detective novels are not quite regarded as aesthetic, but rather intellectual, creations due to their use of puzzles and riddles. American crime writer S.S. Van Dine, in his book *Twenty Rules for Writing Detective Stories* (1928) referred to the genre as a “Game” instead of diving into literary styles and engaging in descriptions and projection of moods. He further explains “a detective story should state a problem, analyze it, and bring it to a successful conclusion” (Gulddal and King, 2020)

In the process, it should adhere to a set of patterns and rules. For instance, a mystery novel should adopt a deductive style and stir clear from supernatural explanations and most importantly, it should involve the reader as well, which means the reader needs to be provided with a fair number of details to

take part in the investigation journey. These restrictions assure the “fair play” factor which is a key element in Golden Age detective fiction (Jameson, 1975).

Crime fiction has been regarded as an interface which links narratives to the sociocultural questions and concerns “crime fiction is not just a form of popular entertainment, characterized by its constant recycling of commercially successful conventions. Rather, it is a narrative vector for exploring a range of wider social, political issues...” (Gulddal and King, 2020, 15). In other words, the genre uses the literary written word to portray the sociocultural mind set.

It is a nest of clues and evidence garnished by puzzles and riddles implemented by different criminal master minds. It is a genre which does not claim stability and perceptiveness; it shatters the typical norms of a steady genre. It is in fact a hybrid formula enhanced by mobility (Gulddal, and King, 2020). Furthermore, recent scholarship viewed that this genre is an effervescent zone of mutation and innovations which helped shift the former definitions by means of Jacques Derrida’s theory of deconstructive questioning (H. Maltz, 2021)

In the 19th century, the history of crime fiction was quite dominated by three figures Edgar Allan Poe, Wilkie Collins, and Conan Doyle. Although one of them held the title of the founder of the genre. Chronologically, Edgar Allan Poe was the first to stir away from romance and introduce mystery by inventing a crime-solving protagonist C. Auguste Dupin who was featured in three different stories: “The Murders in The Rue Morgue” (1841), “The Mystery of Marie Roget” (1842), and “The Purloined Letter” (1844). In these stories, Dupin’s deductive skills were exploited to hunt clues and reach the solution of the transgressive act; this creation made him the patriarch of the legacy which includes the following detective figures: Holmes, Poirot, Miss Marple, Maigret, Father Brown, Sam Spade, John Rebus... (R. Tyers, 2022).

Poe’s adoption of the ratiocination style which stands for the use of rationality and common sense has inspired many writers after him. “Edgar Allan Poe, who in his carelessly prodigal fashion, threw out the seeds from which so much of our present literature has sprung, was the father of the detective tale” (S. Pigalev, 2020).

Auguste Dupin became a well-known detective figure in the literary chart; a well-mannered Parisian who possesses a high level of intellect and a sharp analytical eye depending on rationality and logic. Dupin was introduced in a period in which publishers and writers were striving for new trends which may attract the attention of a great mass of readers. Therefore, during the two decades after Poe’s publication there was a significant development in crime fiction (Frank, 2003).

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In 1859, Wilkie Collins published *The Woman in White*, followed directly by Mrs. Henry Wood's *East Lynne* (1860); the detectible common feature of their plots is the characters and setting choice. They were all decent upper-class individuals; therefore, the setting was quite adequate for conspiracy, inheritances, and suspicions (Frank, 2003). The labeling of the detective was not quite important during the first appearance of the genre. For instance, in *The Woman in White*, the two characters Marian Halcombe and Walter Hartright played a prominent role in unveiling the gloomy events and the presented puzzles. In both works, the investigators are familiar figures who share the same class and social circle. It was an implicit message from the upper class which is to protect its supremacy and its absolute independence from the normal policemen (H. Maltz, 2021)

In 1868, there was a noticeable change after the publication of *Moonstone* by Wilkie Collins which was regarded as the longest and the most representative of modern English detective novels. It exposes a grand theft of an expensive diamond which is shown in the title "Stone"; this diamond was inherited by Rachel Verinder, the niece of Colonel Herncastle. The story is narrated by four different figures which ultimately show the change. It plays with the reader's concentration due to the different perspectives and reasoning presented by the different narrators. Based on the different layers which added to the tension of the doer, the police were involved. For the first time, a sensation novel involves a police detective who gradually loses his importance in the story. It was later solved by an adventurer which was presented as a love interest for Rachel (Frank, 2003).

Moonstone gained an overwhelming amount of appeal, but it did not quite strike vocal imitations. "There was an interregnum of roughly seventeen years between its publication and the appearance of the most famous of all fictional detectives" (H. Maltz, 2021). Conan Doyle has created a figure which later became quite recognizable; he goes by the name of Sherlock Holmes. This detective was notably featured in his series of short stories entitled *The Adventures of Sherlock Holmes*. The readership became immensely bound to his appearance; therefore, his death in "The Final Problem" (1894) has shaken the state of the followers. They have taken him as more than a literary creation and Doyle felt the absolute need to revive the character in "The Hound of the Baskervilles" (Hoboken, 2005).

Scholars have done numerous attempts to give crime fiction a typical formula that is ever lasting, but the latter seemed quite evitable. "We can only speak of the genre as loose grouping of texts, tentatively held together, not by essential or constant features, but by family resemblances" (R. Tyers, 2022). Indeed, throughout the creations in the detective world, methods and plots have become connected yet diverse; a character influences the other to outburst and introduce an investigative style which is different from that already shown.

2.1 Plots and Characterization

Plots and characters are said to be the major pillars of a narrative; therefore, they are to be as sharp and sculptured as the creator's mind. All writers are required to produce valiant characters and groundbreaking plots, but the detective ones are to give a tinge more since they must save the element of surprise and lay out clues via the characters.

The "whodunit" stories are explicitly bound to crimes that need to be solved by the main character who is the detective (Thomas, 2004). Therefore, most stories are written from the narrator's point of view and the detective's role is to be prominent through a large body of works. The writer tends to stir clear from sequencing scenes in a row; he/she ought to build tension through a set of events; "that's a plot that's circling the drain instead of heading towards the finishing line" (H. Maltz, 2021) which denotes the ultimate need of suspense in a mystery work. Furthermore, the plot is to showcase an eye-catching hook which both straightens the narrative and eliminates the dim possibility of having one close-ended resolution.

It is quite common for the first scene to start by a dramatized event or relevant flash back which requires detective investigations. For instance, in the *Bleak Midwinter* by Julia Spencer Flamingo, the first scene shows an abandoned child near a church. As a hook, the writer has set an interesting yet confusing start which clears the floor for an unlimited set of questions (Breen, 1993).

The protagonist in the story is most likely exposed to hard times such as major disappointment which hinders his/her objectives to fuel the drama. These setbacks can come from the detective him/herself to entangle the story and introduce plot twists. Therefore, the protagonist and the notion of time are in a long continuous race until the closing scene to serve a heroic image (Breen, 1993).

Mystery narrations are to save a spot for a final confrontation which unveils the truth behind the riddle in hands following an entangled climax. This final touch showcases the triumph of the protagonist and the ultimate defeat of the antagonist therefore the end is to be merely plausible (Breen, 1993).

Detective writers are to pay extra attention to characterizing their work; the cast of the story is single-handedly picked to serve a particular aim in the narrative (S. Pigalev, 2020). It starts by a peculiar character often valiant and vocal which is the detective. He/she sounds rationality and perseverance that help him/her to reveal the truth and solve the riddles. His/her eccentricity is the asset which sets him/her apart from the crowd (H. Maltz, 2021).

Furthermore, the criminal is the sound of disorder; this character launches a clash of intellect with the detective. The criminal's demeanor is diverse and changes from a setting to another, he/she can hold psychotic traits which lead him to revolting crimes. Under other circumstances, he/she might be blinded

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by revenge which leads them to commit a crime forcibly. Therefore, this complex formula needs a sharp mind for it to be decomposed. Mystery and surprise are garnished by a set of suspects who are handpicked to discombobulate the vision of both the detective and the reader by creating a breakage which serves drama and suspense.

3. *The Golden Age*

Throughout the inner-war period, crime fiction has reached the epitome of its fame and success. The detective chart was garnished by a set of brilliant masterminds, both male and females; it was the age in which the detective novel outburst in different manners and gained new altered elements (Scaggs, 2005).

In Britain, the point of its origin was credited to the queen of detective fiction, Agatha Christie, after her publication of *The Mysterious Affair at Styles* in 1920. Christie had an immense influence on the genre and carried her reign even after the Golden Age which is considered to have faded by the wake of the Second World War. In addition to Christie's contribution, Britain has defined the Golden Age with the presence of three other female writers who concentrated heavily on featuring male detectives in their works (Scaggs, 2005).

The first of these skillful representatives was Dorothy L. Sayers, the creator of Lord Peter Wimsey, an intellectual aristocratic yet distracted detective. Since his first appearance in *Whose Body?* he became the most imitated character in almost all the Golden Age works. Despite his personality flaws, Wimsey matures as a detective in progress of the series *More Work for the Undertaker* (1948) and *The Tiger in the Smoke* (1952) (Scaggs, 2005).

Among the writer's worth mentioning who prospered in the Golden Age was Anthony Berkely, the founder of the detection club in 1928 and the creator of *The Poisoned Chocolates Case* (1929). He adopted the "Fair play" patterns in writing his detective stories; which denotes that the reader should be exposed to a fair amount of information and clues to be able to solve the crime at the heart of the story. Nicholas Blake, also known as the Poet Cecil Day-Lewis, contributed heavily in the detective chart by writing essays on the detective genre as a prototype for his fictional stories such as *A Question of Proof* (1935) (F. Ramazan, 2022)

Even though the classic Whodunit stories were considered a British form, in contrast to the American mode which is commonly known as "Hard Boiled", the fellow practitioners were quite active during the Golden Age (Leroy, 2006). Their narratives were quite opposed; the whodunit stories create a virtual interaction with the reader by emphasizing on image descriptions and puzzles to test the reader's intellect regarding the case and its resolution. As for the hardboiled ones, they give extra attention to

settings and events which normally promote violence and betrayal (Jefferson, 2006). One of the pioneers in the American chart was Dickson Carr who was also known as Carter Dickson; he was a familiar figure in the Locked-room mysteries like *The Three Coffins* (1935) featuring the detective Dr Gideon Fell. His plotting was quite explicit; he emphasized on puzzles and gloominess at the heart of the story, often jeopardizing the character's development and credibility (T. Ronald, 2004).

The Golden Age has shattered the typical trait of detective writing; it managed to break free from the constant hunt of realism and police procedurals. Therefore, it favors the single procedure over that of the group. It gave voice to the female creativity and her invincible presence in a field dominated by males. It opened the floor for a renegotiation of the definition of the genre with the early patterns and practitioners of crime fiction.

4. An Overview of and *Then There Were None*:

And Then There Were None by Agatha Christie was officially published in the UK back in 1939 under its original title *Ten Little Niggers* (Ramazan, 2022). However, as the title seemed offensive and racist, it was later altered into different titles. John Curran (2003) stated that the novel is "Christie's most famous novel, her greatest technical achievement and the best-selling crime novel of all time". Christie's ultimate motive to publish the story was the entanglement and the impossibility of the detection.

And Then There Were None deals with a baffling crime committed on an isolated island, where an experienced judge with particular traits appears to be responsible for the death of ten individuals, alleged to be former criminals who have somehow escaped justice. The detection of this case is blocked and almost impossible to proceed as there is no witness, just a house full of slaughter and a manuscript thrown into the sea.

The victims are formally invited to an isolated mansion located on the Devon coast by Mr. Owen, an unknown host, via stamped letters. After a troubling trip to the Devon coast, the guests reach the island. They find a frame of the nursery rhyme "Ten Little Soldier Boys" hanged in each of their rooms, and after that when seated around the table, they notice a tray of ten little statues which represent the ten little soldiers in the nursery rhyme. After a moment of laughter and greeting, the guests hear an unknown voice coming from a stranded room charging them with specific crimes. Shortly after, the death of each guest is followed by the disappearance of a little figure in the tray. Throughout the process of a group slaughter, each character tries to interpret their role in the island; they try to unveil the murderer and attempt to escape their ultimate death along with confronting their own guilt.

Christie implemented a set of psychological and social aspects in the part where the characters gather to confront their offences; the narrative looks like a series of unlimited scenarios or fiction of truths

which concern multiple individuals (T. Ronald, 2006). The narrative is carried out in an omniscient third point of view. However, there are a set of passages told in the first-person narrative, mainly those of the judge who is the murderer. The characters were voiced through the stream of consciousness technique which represents them in an indirect way.

2. *The Absence of the Detective in And Then There Were None*

Agatha Christie had formed the novel through a medley of texts which contain digression and disruption; the novel is delivered in an episodic rhythm which gives it the shape of a play. The plot of *And Then There Were None* eliminates the ultimate presence of a single detective; in other words, there is not a detective as far as the plot is concerned (M. Ayca V, 2017)

A group of peculiar individuals with different indictments along with a sadistic judge play the role of detectives throughout the entire story. The only figure of real detectives, the Scotland Yard commissioner, and his assistant were left out of the plot. The novel serves the idea of investigation as it shows the will of the judge to solve the slaughter which he had planned for ahead of time. The irony is within the reach of the reader who follows the judge playing a multiplicity of role: impeachable judge, criminal, suspect, victim, a voluntary detective, and a narrator (Kelleghan, 2001). Overall, Christie foreshadowed the flexibility of the detective character by breaking it free from its singularity through creating a plot where a set of characters are all involved in the process of detection.

After a thorough examination of Christie's work, it is shown that the plot is not bound to the presence of the detective as an independent character; contrary to what was shown in the very beginning of the mechanisms of the genre. The reader as a prominent party is eligible to compensate the absence of the detective character. In other words, characters and narrative combine for the reader to be granted the title of a detective. The process of the reconstruction of the plot which is ultimately unveiling the truth through detection is quite hidden in crucial respects of the reader (M. AycaV, 2017).

The elements mentioned above were shown through a set of implicit rhetorical questions implemented by Agatha Christie for her readership; each entanglement in the plot was presented by a question. For example, in the very beginning, the guests were invited by an unknown host under gloomy circumstances which instantly triggers their curiosity to identify the host.

6. *Conclusion*

The art of mystery is garnished and mostly grounded by crimes and detection. The emergence of this genre was directly followed by the rise of theories and speculations mostly inspired by recent readings. Agatha Christie, considered as the queen of detectives, had contributed immensely to define, and introduce this genre but also to subvert its main pillars during the Golden Age. She demonstrated that a

successful detective novel can be dispensed from the presence of a detective whose absence does not preclude solving the mystery in the end in an innovative and unusual manner. Therefore, her novels can be seen as the deconstruction of the genre. In other words, Christie's *And Then There Were None* unveils the double-faced nature of detection and resolution, as it plays with the following elements, the presence/absence of the detective, crime/criminal, and narrator/reader.

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