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**The mystery of mass appeal: Critical clues to the success of
Agatha Christie**

Pardue, Mary Jane, D.A.

Middle Tennessee State University, 1988

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**The Mystery of Mass Appeal: Critical
Clues to the Success of
Agatha Christie**

Mary Jane Pardue

**A dissertation presented to the
Graduate Faculty of Middle Tennessee State University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree Doctor of Arts**

August, 1988

The Mystery of Mass Appeal: Critical
Clues to the Success of
Agatha Christie

APPROVED:

Graduate Committee:

Charles K. Wages
Major Professor

Elaine Ware
Reader

Frank Giamanni
Head of the English Department

Mary Martin
Dean of the Graduate School

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Abstract

The Mystery of Mass Appeal: Critical

Clues to the Success of

Agatha Christie

by Mary Jane Pardue

In order to define the appeal of Agatha Christie, one must explore the mystery as escapist/entertainment literature and discuss the mystery as formula fiction. Christie is validated as a pop/mystery writer by her autobiography and comments from critics. Then a selection of her novels shows how structure, setting and time, characters and relationships, and theme fit the models for formula fiction and how they function in Christie's overall appeal. Twelve novels are chosen as representative of the Christie collection. They are The Mysterious Affair at Styles, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, The Murder at the Vicarage, Murder on the Orient Express, The ABC Murders, Cards on the Table, Death on the Nile, The Body in the Library, A Caribbean Mystery, Hallowe'en Party, Sleeping Murder, and Curtain.

As the detective story developed, a number of conventions evolved forming the basic structure of the mystery and establishing bonds between the writer and the audience. Christie developed a formula consistent with the

Mary Jane Pardue

structure and fundamentals of the genre, thus establishing herself as a writer of escapist/entertainment fiction. Her novels follow a specific pattern that offers the reader danger and excitement in a controlled and limited way. She follows a definite set of rules, but the pattern is always the same. And it is her attempts at varying situations and conflicts that are at the core of her appeal.

Christie places a great deal of importance on setting, taking pains to create exotic locales or placing her story in a quiet little hamlet in the English countryside. Characterization was important to Christie, and she spent considerable time developing characters to fit her formula but also stretching them to their limits and vitalizing them as stereotypes. The predominant theme in Christie is the triumph of good over evil, but she also explores the themes of ratiocination as the way to truth, appearance versus reality, and order versus chaos.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

The detective or mystery novel is a fairly recent invention, but its roots can be traced far back into history. Crime has been a part of literature since biblical times, and man's fascination with solving puzzles and seeing that justice be done has always been part of the human psyche. Reginald Hill, in a look at the history of crime literature in H. R. F. Keating's book Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction, says crime literature could not come about until society took an enormous step toward the modern, i.e., "when it started to be scientific rather than superstitious, bourgeois rather than aristocratic, urban rather than pastoral, and capitalist rather than Christian" (20). By the eighteenth century, hints toward detective fiction were becoming clear with the emphasis in literature on "psychological and social realism." The Age of Reason had begun, and the early crime literature that appeared in the century reflects this interest (20). In order to define the appeal of one of the most popular crime writers of all time, Agatha Christie, one must look at the development of the genre, establish the mystery as escapist/entertainment

literature, and discuss the mystery as formula fiction. Then Christie must be validated as a pop/mystery writer using comments from critics and from her autobiography. Attention then can be turned to a selection of Christie's novels to see how structure, setting and time, characters and relationships, and theme fit the models for formula fiction and how they function in Christie's overall appeal. Twelve novels will be examined as representative of the Christie canon. They are The Mysterious Affair at Styles, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, The Murder at the Vicarage, Murder on the Orient Express, The ABC Murders, Cards on the Table, Death on the Nile, The Body in the Library, A Caribbean Mystery, Hallowe'en Party, Sleeping Murder, and Curtain.

The most significant early strand of crime literature was the picaresque tale, which was the episodic and frequently autobiographical account of the adventures of the wandering "picaro" or rogue. Hill says the principal English contributor to the form was Thomas Nashe and his The Unfortunate Traveller, published in 1594. Other examples of the form through translations sprang up in the seventeenth century. More popular, however, were the broadside ballads and chapbooks that provided accounts of crimes. The developing popular press was satisfying the public's fascination of crime with sensational pamphlets describing the latest gory crime. In London, reports

were published offering verbatim accounts of trials and condemned men's final hours before executions. During Elizabeth's reign, A Mirror for Magistrates was still a best seller. But the working class was developing a "love for the lurid" even though this interest was still accompanied by an optimism left over from medieval times that with God's help everything will be fine. Hill says, "it is the erosion of this optimism both by the secularization of society and by a vast increase in the incidence of crime that helps pave the way for the novel of detection" (20-21).

Another early contributor to crime literature was Daniel Defoe, whose famous A General History of The Pyrates, published in 1724 and 1728, recounts the lives of about thirty real-life villains. In 1719 he wrote a "fictionalized" account of Captain Avery, a real pirate. Defoe also wrote biographies of notorious thief Jack Sheppard, who became a folk hero mainly because of his successful escapes, and thief capturer Jonathan Wild, who himself was executed in 1725. Other books by Defoe detailed criminal ingenuity and techniques and the sensational facts about crimes. Even Defoe's two great whore-biographies Moll Flanders, published in 1722, and Roxana, published in 1724, were early crime novels. Tobias Smollett's The Adventures of Ferdinand Count Fathom, published in 1753, presented an early "hero" in crime

literature. The novel, about Fatham the villain, contains elements of the Gothic novel. Horace Walpole's The Castle of Otranto, published in 1764, was, according to Hill, the "first purely Gothic novel in English." Other examples of Gothic literature are William Beckford's Vathek, published in 1786, Matthew Gregory Lewis' The Monk, published in 1795, Ann Radcliffe's The Mysteries of Udolpho, published in 1794, and Charles Robert Maturine's Melmoth the Wanderer, published in 1829. Hill explains that none of these is exactly crime fiction because their aim is simply to terrify "even when naturalistic explanations are provided for apparently supernatural events." But, Hill says, "they all contain crimes and they are the ancestors of the modern American 'Gothic' genre in which a heroine in a remote situation finds herself threatened by dangers which are usually explained in conventional terms" (23-24).

Hill says many historians believe crime literature began with William Godwin's The Adventures of Caleb Williams, published in 1794. Hill says that while the book has many "generic resemblances" to the classical crime novel, Godwin's purpose was very different. "He wants to demonstrate his thesis that man, born free and capable of perfect happiness if only he follows the dictates of pure reason, is corrupted and deflected by society's institutions, in particular those of the law which places men in a false relation to each other"

(24-25). Hill says Godwin's ideas are revolutionary and the detective novel is basically conservative. He adds:

The Age of Reason has not killed God but merely retired him. The detective is His agent, and pure reason will lead him to the solution of crimes, not the dissolution of society. Detective stories may help expiate guilt, as W. H. Auden suggests. They will never imply, as does Caleb Williams, that there is a way back into the Garden without paying off some divine landlord's arrears. (25)

Citing Caleb Williams as an ancestor of a form whose great absolute it sets out to attack is one of many contradictions in "the move from the literature of crime to the genre of crime fiction," and this problem may stem from the contradictory nature of crime. "It is disgusting, it is fascinating; we find it incomprehensible, we feel the same impulses; we want the criminal to be caught, we want him to escape; he is a monster, he is a hero; he should be treated, he should be shot" (25), Hill says. Nevertheless, Caleb Williams is not unique on the road to crime fiction.

One last contributor to early crime literature was Francois Eugene Vidocq, whose autobiographical Memories, written in 1828 and 1829, tells how he went from being a convicted criminal to a police informant to a noted

detective. His influence on early nineteenth-century crime literature was very strong. Hill concludes by stating:

The movement from the literature of crime to genre "crime fiction" is broadly a movement from the criminal as hero to the detective as hero. And this process is encapsulated in the life, and in the literature, of this one man. He confirms that the new myth of law and order has taken over from the old myth of divine providence. The stage is set for the appearance of the most popular, most prevalent, and, apparently, most permanent literary genre ever known to mankind. (25)

Laying the groundwork for the "most popular, most prevalent, and most permanent literary genre" was Edgar Allan Poe and Conan Doyle. Keating calls Doyle the Father of Crime Literature and Poe the Godfather. Poe set down the principles of detective fiction in three or four tales including The Murders in the Rue Morgue. Poe, however, was a notable contributor to the Gothic novel as well. His discoveries, especially his noted detective, Le Chevalier Auguste Dupin, produced tons of imitators, among them Wilkie Collins' The Moonstone, published in 1877, and Doyle's Sherlock Holmes stories. There was a forty-year gap between Poe's invention and Doyle's

exploitation, partly because of what Keating calls the "novelty" of Poe's discovery. Poe failed to make Dupin much of a person, whereas Holmes is a rich character. "That is why the Holmes stories took off in the extraordinary way they did, and why Poe's hero never became a living myth" (27), Keating says. Nevertheless, Doyle's debt to Poe was immense. The Great Detective emerged, "as brought into being by Edgar Allan Poe, as definitely established by Conan Doyle." He is "capable, as ordinary mortals are not, of escaping from the trap of his own personality" (29). Keating says the detective can leave his own personality and enter into those of others, and this process whereby he breaks out of his own personality is "mingling of the rational and the intuitive." Keating says:

Dupin is just the combination of reason and imagination which Poe in his literary essays frequently praised. He is a poet and a mathematician. He can arrive at what seems to be a discovery, something altogether new, by making this combination. . . . "All novel concepts are merely unusual combinations," Poe said in writing about Fancy (the reasoning faculty) and Imagination (the intuitive). That ability Dupin passed down to his many successors, first among them Holmes. (29)

Thus, the Great Detective evolved only to give rise to plenty of imitations both in the United States and abroad. For the purpose of defining Agatha Christie's appeal, it will be necessary only to focus on the rise of the English detective story. Robert Barnard traces the British detective story that flourished in the 1920s to the 1660s as Restoration comedy. By the seventeenth century, people in the upper class had been through two gruelling decades in which their king had been executed and their estates had been sequestered. They had been reduced to pathetic creatures at continental courts. Through Restoration comedy, they created "an artificial world of aristocratic elegance, where their standards ruled, where their wit and taste were exalted, where the rude outside could be ejected from the charmed circle" (Keating 30). Thus, the literary form was a way they isolated themselves to keep out "the realities of the changing world." In the 1920s change again wracked England, and the middle class responded in the same way the upper class had three centuries before. As the twentieth century got underway, labor parties flourished, and new Bolshevik republics came into being. The whole set of middle-class standards collapsed; and people in the middle class, thinking their world was gone forever like the Restoration nobility, took refuge in literature. Barnard describes the classical detective form they created as containing stereotyped

characters and situations and recalling a period where class distinction was accepted and easily defined. The outside in the detective circle could be "cast out of the charmed circle," a way of assuring middle-class people that their world was not completely in shambles. Barnard says in the 1920s, the Golden Age of the detective story, writers created an artificial world. "Created partly as an escape from an intolerable reality," the product focused on one aspect of great appeal in the traditional detective story--the contract between author and reader. The agreement was that the author would "entertain" the reader by presenting a product that appealed to his intellect. Barnard says:

The author promised to present the problem in a fair way, and the reader, if he was to be entertained at all, was bound to keep his mind working to spot clues and wrestle with their significance. If the reader guessed the solution, he was pleased with himself, if he did not he was pleased with the author.

In neither case was the author the loser. (30)

Like the literature of the Restoration period, the form abounded with rules which distinguished it from other popular literary forms such as the thriller and the Gothic novel. Most of the rules however, focused on the "logical

rigour" that must be maintained and the contract between the author and the reader. The form was a conservative one focusing on manners and "playing fair." The "big four" writers of the classic English detective stories were Agatha Christie, Dorothy Sayers, Margery Allingham, and Ngaio Marsh. Barnard says of the four, Christie was the first to publish and the "one most triumphantly to survive." He says:

We think of Christie as an English village writer, but in fact her production is very varied: she liked to alternate her home settings with international excursions, and (like any country gentlewoman) took the occasional trip to London. Her hold on the reader was due, to my mind, to her productivity, her consistency, her narrative skill, her clear-eyed concentration on problem, on reader deception. . . . If the characterization is basic, the writing lacklustre, the storytelling on the other hand is superb, brilliantly organized around the need to present a problem and to both conceal and facilitate its solution. The clues are always there, though not always presented as clues. (32-33)

Barnard says readers loved Christie for her style, especially "the panache of her solutions." Her stories are constructed in a very abstract way, and it is in "abstract ingenuity" that her strength lies. To Christie, the plot was supreme. Characters and setting received much less attention (33-34).

Another critic, Gwen Robyns, echoes Barnard when she says it is the surprise endings that attract readers to Christie. In her stories, Christie "domesticated" murder and transformed it "into nothing more perilous than an intriguing game of chess or a satisfactory crossword puzzle." She steered clear of violence in her books, preferring rather to manipulate character and situations into a formula Robyns calls "pure puzzle writing."

Despite the strict conventions, Agatha Christie stories can be set in any time period. Robyns maintains that among many people there is a distaste for "the abandonment of standards and conventions they were brought up with." There is a desire on the part of many to be reasonably proper and decent. Since Christie never really abandoned those standards in her novels, she appeals to a strong sense of nostalgia for the past, which continues to thrive today. Finally, Christie knew intimately about people and relationships. She understood the "essence of genteel living," which filled her books with the gentle nuances of aristocratic life (4-17).

In an essay on Agatha Christie's style, Edmund Crispin defines the primary factors in Christie's success as the tension created by her "cunning plot construction and the fact that the plot is expressed in as uncomplicated a way as possible. There is also a "desanitizing" of unpleasantness. In a Christie novel, one can count on things. Crispin says:

You know, for example, that the corpse is not a real corpse, but merely a pretext for a good puzzle. You know that the policeman is not a real policeman, but a good-natured dullard introduced on the scene to emphasize the much greater intelligence of Poirot or Miss Marple. You know there will be no loving description of the details of physical violence. You know . . . that, although the murderer is going to be hanged you will be kept well at a distance from this displeasing event. You know that although people may fall in love, you will not be regaled to the physical details of what they do in bed. You know, relaxing with a Christie, that for an hour or two you can forget the authentic nastiness of life and submerge yourself in a world where, no matter how many murders may take place, you are essentially in never-never land. (47)

Crispin says the reader will always know what to expect from a Christie novel. There will be no nastiness, but there will be excitement. There will be no violence or sordidness, but there will be a "good puzzle" and a trip for a time into an intriguing "never-never land."

It is this plot construction and the elements Christie always includes in her novels that create the formula for her fiction. John Cawelti in his study of formula literature says the art of literary escapism involves recognizing and appealing to two basic psychological needs. First, man seeks excitement to escape the boredom and ennui of everyday life. Secondly, he needs security from the unpredictable world. Man has a primal need for order and peace in a chaotic world; but without the sense of danger and excitement, man becomes miserable and bored. Vicarious gratification is a salvation to the intelligent man caught up in a routine life. Cawelti says the synthesis of these two tensions is the essence of escape and entertainment.

In regarding or viewing a formulaic work, we confront the ultimate excitement of love and death, but in such a way that our basic sense of security and order is intensified rather than disrupted, because, first of all, we know that this is an imaginary rather than a real experience, and, second, because the excitement

and uncertainty are ultimately controlled and limited by the familiar world of the formulaic structure. (16)

The fundamental principle of Christie's mystery literature is the solution of a crime through investigation and discovery of hidden secrets. The solution is always a rational solution and the investigation an intellectual, reasoning activity. Cawelti defines the appeal of the formula mystery to intellectuals when he asserts that the narrative involves isolating crimes and making deductions from clues in order to place them in their rational order in a complete scheme of cause and effect. It is that activity and the basic belief that all problems have a rational solution that cause the mystery story to appeal to those with special interest in the "processes of thought" (42-43). The classical detective story became a popular type of formula literature between the late nineteenth century and the end of World War II because of this principle of rational solution in an uncertain world. The genre remains popular today because of its insistence on order in a disordered universe. Additionally, the mystery today, especially that of Agatha Christie, appeals to a popular sense of nostalgia. It is the familiar world of the past consoling the unfamiliar world of the present and the terrifying world of the future.

While she may not have consciously worked out a specific formula for her mysteries, Agatha Christie

intuitively knew what makes a "good detective story from the time she sat down to write her first, The Mysterious Affair at Styles, published in 1920. Christie had been a fan of Sherlock Holmes stories, so she had a model from which to work. Thirty years later, while working on her autobiography and reflecting on her craft, Christie recalled that her sister Madge bet her she could not write a detective story. She thought about it for a couple of years; and during the first world war while working in a hospital dispensary, the idea simmered. Surrounded by poisonous drugs, she decided that poisoning would be her method of murder. The questions then were who, where, when, and how. After settling on a technique for the proper detection-mystification balance, Christie concluded:

The whole point of a good detective story was that it must be somebody obvious but at the same time, for some reason, you would find that it was not obvious, that he could not possibly have done it. Though really, of course, he had done it. (300-301)

The principles of rationality and practicality carried over from her plots to her technique. She was extremely conscious of the requirements necessary to get a book published. If it sold well, that was added success. Considering writers more tradesmen than

geniuses, she approached the profession from a realistic standpoint. Figure out the formula, she reasons. It is no good writing a novel that is thirty thousand words long because no one will publish it. Rather, she says, "you must learn the technical skills, and then, within that trade, you can apply your own creative ideas; but you must submit to the discipline of form" (401).

The right length for the detective story she considers to be fifty thousand words. She says some readers feel cheated if they pay their money and get only fifty thousand words. But that length works for her. Twenty thousand words is excellent for a short story or thriller, but the short story length is not really well suited to the detective story at all because there is not room to fully develop the story and its conventions.

Even after several novels and short stories, Christie still considered herself an amateur who wrote mostly for pleasure. She says it was not until her first marriage to Archie Christie failed and she set out to write The Mystery of the Blue Train because she desperately needed money that she took on the role of the professional. Driven by necessity, she "worked out" the plot and determined where the novel was going. But she said, "I had no joy in writing" during what was no doubt a very difficult time in her life. It was at that moment when she changed from an amateur to a professional. "I assumed the burden

of a professional, which is to write even when you don't want to, don't much like what you are writing, and aren't writing particularly well" (429). Her formula, however, did not fail her. Even though she says she always hated Blue Train and critics generally agree it is not one of her better novels, it was published in 1928 and did sell.

Christie wrote for the entertainment of her readers. She says she always wanted to be a good detective story writer; and by the time she became confident enough to think she was good at her craft, her books began to satisfy her. Humbly enough, she says:

They never pleased me entirely, of course, because I don't suppose that is what one ever achieves. Nothing turns out quite in the way you think it would when you are sketching out notes for the first chapter, or walking about muttering to yourself and seeing a story unroll. (519)

She says she considers the detective story to be the story of the chase. "It was also very much of a story with a moral; in fact it was the old Everyman Morality Tale, the hunting down of Evil and the triumph of Good" (527). Serious about the themes of her novels and conscious of changes in popular literature, Christie says that during the first world war, the evil man was wicked, and the good man was the hero. "We had not begun to

wallow in psychology," she says. So she wrote and read books "against the criminal and for the innocent victim." She adds that no one would have dreamed "that there would come a time when crime books would be read for their love of violence, the taking of sadistic pleasure in brutality for its own sake. . . . But now cruelty seems almost everyday bread and butter" (527-28).

Christie concludes in her autobiography that detective stories fall into three groups: the light-hearted thriller, the intricate story, and the detective story accelerated by passion. The light-hearted story is particularly pleasant to write. The intricate story is much more difficult to handle because of the complicated plot. Finally, it is the detective story that is pushed on by passion to help save innocence of which she was particularly fond, "because it is innocence that matters, not guilt" (528).

Christie recognizes the appeal of crime in fiction and gains pleasure in writing and reading a well-constructed murder mystery. But she insists that good must triumph over evil and that killers should be punished, even though she usually ends her novels before the criminal is sentenced. In general, that good should triumph over evil is one of the principles of her fiction. She says:

I can suspend judgment on those who kill--but I think they are evil for the community; they bring in nothing except hate, and take from it all they can. I am willing to believe that they are made that way, that they are born with a disability, for which, perhaps, one should pity them; but even then, I think, not spare them. . . . The innocent must be protected; they must be able to live at peace and charity with their neighbors. (528-29)

A strong conviction that the innocent should be protected and that evil should be punished explains why Christie has more interest in her victims than in her criminals. "The more passionately alive the victim, the more glorious indignation I have on his behalf, and am full of delighted triumph when I have delivered a near-victim out of the shadow of death" (530).

Christie's formula and the conventions she employed have earned her the title Queen of Crime. She was productive for more than sixty years, and her success is due largely to "the remarkable ingenuity of her structures of detection and mystification" (Cawelti 113). Because there are nearly identical structures in most of her stories, it is possible to appreciate other aspects of her art within the classical detective formula. Christie's complexity and ingenuity in the development of her structure are

reflected in her novels. And it is her ability to balance the detection-mystification structure with enough character and atmosphere to complement rather than detract that brought her success (Cawelti 119). A look at how Christie's formula for detective fiction fits the standard formula for the genre will be the focus of the next chapter.

Chapter 2

The Christie Formula

The crime story as a popular genre has changed very little over the years since its introduction by Edgar Allan Poe in the 1840s. It flourished in the first half of the twentieth century and gave rise to the adventure or melodrama, which included the hard-boiled detective story and the enforcer story. Common to all of these was a pattern writers followed ensuring their success and promoting the bond between the authors and their audiences. John Cawelti, in his study of formula literature, has defined patterns of the classical detective formula that were followed by popular mystery writers after Poe. Cawelti says the classical detective story formula is a set of conventions or a pattern that the writer uses to develop a certain kind of situation, certain characters and their relationships, and a certain type of setting appropriate for the action.

The standard situation in the classical detective story begins with an unsolved crime and moves toward the solution of the mystery. The story may focus either on determining the identity and motive of the criminal, or it may concentrate on his/her method and the evidence

of the crime. As a general rule, there is a detective present who has little personal interest in the crime but, in a detached way, manages to solve the mystery. The crime must be a major one so as to produce complex ramifications, but the victim is not mourned. The writer must draw the reader's attention away from the human side to the scientific process of detection. The detachment of the detective and the reader from the crime--usually a murder in modern stories--is vital to the story because it simplifies the situation. Characters in the detective story are usually not complex, and the crime is an intrusion of evil into their lives which causes trouble. If the mystery can be solved, the trouble will be alleviated, thus reducing the story to the "simple issue between good and evil" (80-81).

The detective story formula, according to Cawelti, has six components: introduction of the detective; crime and clues; investigation; announcement of solution; explanation of solution; and denouement. Not all components must occur in order, but they all must be there if the story is to be considered a piece of classical detective writing.

The opening of the story can follow two routes. It can begin by introducing the detective showing his skill of detection through a minor incident, or the story may open at the detective's quiet retreat. The minor episode

introduction immediately establishes the detective's credibility and sets up a bond of trust between him and the reader. The quiet opening at the detective's retreat sets a feeling of order, thereby giving the introduction of the crime more impetus to disrupt the harmonious order of the setting. Frequently the charming and peaceful opening scene to introduce the detective furthers his detachment from the crime. "The crime represents a disorder outside the confines of his personal experience, which thrusts itself upon him for resolution" (83).

The narrator is frequently a character close to the detective. Like Dr. Watson in Sherlock Holmes tales, he is one who admiringly observes and comments on the detective's actions; but he cannot follow the detective's process of deduction. By using a Watson-like narrator, the reader can follow the detective's thought processes. Therefore, the writer can divert the reader's attention frequently toward secondary incidents and keep him from solving the mystery prematurely. One thing that separates the hard-boiled detective story from the classical detective story is the use of the detective as narrator. The hard-boiled sleuth is more of an ordinary man who is frequently stumped by the crime; therefore, allowing him to figure out the solution with the audience is feasible. Since the classical detective is a man of supreme intelligence or intuition and uses "ratiocinative processes"

to solve the crime, he must be headed towards the solution from the beginning. When the solution is finally revealed, the audience sees that the detective understood the key clues from the beginning when the mass of conflicting information was confusing everyone else. It would, thus, be cumbersome to keep the mystery a secret from the audience if the classical detective were telling the story. If the writer chooses not to use the Watson-like narrator, he must use a detached or anonymous one who can witness the actions of the detective with the audience but not intrude upon his mental processes. Of course, the obvious reason for keeping the reader away from the detective's point of view is that it allows the writer the ability to easily introduce the element of surprise at the climax or ending. The Watsonian narrator can manipulate the reader's sympathies for the suspects and admiration for the detective. The reader can identify with the Watsonian narrator because he is much more human and befuddled by the crime (83-85).

The second component in the classical detective story formula, according to Cawelti, is the introduction of the crime and clues. Poe and Doyle usually introduce the crime immediately after introducing the detective; but some crime writers introduce the crime, then the detective. Frequently one of the suspects is the narrator, a device that puts greater emphasis on the puzzle of the

crime and less on the detective. In fact, the emphasis on the "intricacy of the puzzle" marks the general evolution of the classical detective story. There are two important elements necessary for the crime to be effective. "First, the crime must be surrounded by a number of tangible clues that make it absolutely clear that some agency is responsible for it; and second, it must appear to be insoluble." In this section, the writer introduces a number of clues, some real and some false, that should eventually point to one suspect (85-86).

The next section is a "parade of witnesses, suspects, and false solutions," which make up the investigation. Sometimes, while seeming to lead to clarification of the mystery, the parade of suspects and possible solutions leads the reader even further into the web of confusion. He feels bogged down in "an impenetrable bog of evidence and counterevidence," and just when he is about to give up, the detective steps in. Additionally, the solution of the mystery rescues other characters from suspicion and danger (86).

In many cases, the announcement of the solution is more important than actually nabbing the criminal. The detective's revelation of the solution of the mystery is usually especially dramatic. It is a "climactic moment," the turning point in the story. When the solution is announced, the audience begins to see the action from

the perspective of the detective, so the revelation is a technical turning point in the story as well. The confusing or chaotic series of events is rendered a logical and rational order when the solution is explained. Order is restored to the world of the novel disrupted by the crime. After learning the solution, the reader is elevated to the same superior position as the detective. Finally, Cawelti says, "the special importance of the moment of solution presents the classical writer with the opportunity of having two major climaxes or peaks of tension, the moment of solution and the eventual denouement when the criminal is actually captured" (87).

During the explanation section, the detective is permitted a long discourse on how he arrived at the solution and the method and motive behind the crime. Carolyn Wells says deduction is the motif of most detective novels. And the deduction, she says, "is an unusually perspicacious analytic deduction from inconspicuous clues that we call ratiocination, or more familiarly, the deductive instinct" (87). Wells says the analytical element in the story is the setting forth of a puzzle and then using sound reasoning to reach a logical, satisfying end. She quotes Poe as saying:

The mental features discoursed of as the analytical are, in themselves, but little susceptible of analysis. We appreciate them only

in their effects. We know of them, among other things, that they are always to their possessor, when inordinately possessed, a source of the liveliest enjoyment. As a strong man exults in his physical ability, delighting in such exercises as call his muscles into action, so glories the analyst in the moral activity which disentangles. He derives pleasure from even the most trivial occupations bringing his talent into play. He is fond of enigmas, of conundrums, of hieroglyphics, exhibiting in his solution of each a degree of acumen which appears to the ordinary apprehension preternatural. His results, brought about by the very soul and essence of method, have in truth, the whole air of intuition. (92-93)

Thus, to Poe, it is the explanation--the steps of the deduction--that is important in the detective story.

To many readers, the explanation section is the high point of the story despite the fact that it focuses on intricate reasoning. Furthermore, the explanation is important because it represents the goal the story has been moving toward and the pleasure felt at the solution of a puzzle.

Cawelti says:

The most exciting and successful detective stories seem to me neither those where the

reader solves the crime before the detective announces his solution nor those where he is totally surprised and bamboozled by the solution that the detective arrives at. When the reader feels confident that he understands the mystery before the detective, the story loses interest. Since many stories are fairly easy to solve, I suspect the most confirmed readers develop an ability to put a premature solution out of their minds so that the story is not spoiled for them. On the other hand, if the detective's solution is a total surprise, that too seems less than satisfactory and the reader feels cheated, because it appears his earlier participation in the story has been completely irrelevant. (88)

The explanation in a good detective story, rather than making the reader feel cheated, gives him a feeling of pleasure and delight at seeing the puzzle from another perspective and given a new kind of order. In the detective story, when the solution is reached, it reveals the truth, "the single right perspective and ordering of events" (89).

The "least-likely person" as the criminal is a favorite device used in the classical detective story. The

least-likely person is usually one who has been given fairly little attention in the story and one with whom no bond between him and the reader has developed. He is one for whom the reader has no sympathy or identification. If the least-likely person turns out to be the guilty party, the reader feels pleasure that his favorite characters are finally exonerated (89-90).

Sometimes the denouement and the announcement of the solution are combined in a classical detective story because they are technically similar. Most classical detective stories include the capture and confession of the criminal, but usually this section is fairly brief. Cawelti says:

The tendency to make the denouement simply bear out the detective's solution rather than give the reader a more complex interest in the criminal's predicament points to an observation we have already made: the classical story is more concerned with the isolation and specification of guilt than with the punishment of the criminal. (91)

Agatha Christie's works follow Cawelti's formula for detective fiction fairly closely. She always begins with an unsolved crime and moves toward the solution of the mystery. The story always focuses on determining the identity of the criminal, and it frequently concentrates

on the method and evidence of the crime, thus blending Cawelti's two streams of focus in the situation. In Christie, there is always a detective present, who has little personal interest but in a detached way manages to solve the crime. The crime usually is a murder with significant ramifications and little mourning for the victim and/or victims. Her characters are usually simple. In fact, one major criticism of Christie's novels is that her characters are two-dimensional and not fully developed. And finally, the crime is an intrusion of evil into Christie's world of order and gentility, whether it be on the classic Orient Express or in St. Mary Meade. A look at five Christie novels--The ABC Murders, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Murder on the Orient Express, Cards on the Table, and Murder at the Vicarage--shows how Christie follows Cawelti's formula for detective fiction and what variations she employs to develop her own style.

In many Agatha Christie novels, the detective appears in the first chapter. In the case of Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, they are introduced as the setting is described, whether it be St. Mary Meade as in Murder at the Vicarage or the gathering of passengers for a trip aboard the Orient Express, or a dinner and a "friendly" game of bridge as in Cards on the Table. One noticeable exception is The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, where Poirot's appearance is delayed until the seventh chapter and well

after the murder is committed. Christie was criticized by readers for her method in Roger Ackroyd because they said Christie did not "play fair" in the novel. It may have been that the formula was slightly off from the first page. And even though Roger Ackroyd was a success, it seems to breach several of Christie's own conventions.

In The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, death opens the story. "Mrs. Ferrars died on the night of 16th-17th September--a Thursday" (11) is the first line. There is no minor incident to establish the detective's credibility as Cawelti suggests is present in Poe. And there is no calm, serene setting as with Sherlock Holmes to set a mood of order and tranquility later to be disrupted by the crime. The reader is plunged into the crime. Suicide is introduced as a possible cause of death, but immediately suspicion of foul play is announced at the close of the first chapter. Then comes the background of the people in King's Abbott, a small village, and a series of events that reveals to the reader a knot of complicated relationships that may prove to be vital clues in the mystery. Then, at the end of chapter four, the reader learns, "They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered" (49). The mystery of two suspicious deaths and a web of intrigue is well on the way in less than one-fifth of the novel's length, showing clever means on Christie's part to trap the reader's attention

immediately. She does not relent through the next two hundred pages.

In Cards on the Table, Christie tries a different introduction. The reader meets detective Poirot immediately in the first dozen lines at an exhibition with the intended victim, Mr. Shaitana. Shaitana's character is hardly developed in the brief chapter one, so there is little mourning for him when he is found dead two chapters later. The opening of this novel provides the setting of the murder--Shaitana invites Poirot to a dinner party at his home. They discuss the "art" of murder, and the idea of impending doom is suggested to the reader. In chapter two, Christie introduces and describes the other guests at the dinner who will, very obviously, turn out to be suspects. This section is especially formulaic. As each guest arrives, Christie inserts a few lines of description, which, incidentally, is done so handily that it does not disrupt the flow of the story.

As Mrs. Lorrimer arrives, she is described as a "well-dressed woman of sixty. She had finely-cut features, beautifully arranged gray hair, and a clear, incisive voice" (385). Likewise, Christie describes Major Despard as "a tall, lean, handsome man, his face slightly marred by a scar on the temple" (385).

Certainly the relaxed mood of the characters as they arrive for a pleasant evening of good food and

camaraderie establishes the sense of order to be later turned into chaos by a dastardly deed. Again, as with Roger Ackroyd, the action moves swiftly through dinner and a game of bridge until the murder is discovered in chapter three. Christie, as usual, hooks her readers in the first few pages by allowing the murder to take place immediately after parading a series of characters, all of whom could be suspects.

In another novel, The ABC Murders, Christie again introduces the detective, Poirot, on the first page. There is only brief conversation with his colleague, Captain Hastings, until crime is brought into play. Poirot gets a note of warning from a "madman" that there will be a murder in Andover on the 21st. It is signed ABC (261). In this novel, the list of suspects is not readily available. The story is written to detail a series of murders that Poirot tries to link. Suspense increases for several chapters as the investigation gets under way. There is no mood of peaceful serenity in the opening here--Christie plunges the reader too quickly into crime. And one would assume that Poirot's credibility already has been established. ABC Murders was published in 1935, and Poirot had appeared in at least nine novels and a number of short stories preceding it. If the bond between Christie and her readers had been established fairly early in her career, and

the popularity of her works suggests that it was, then there would be no need for that early episode setting up the detective as a credible detective that Cawelti describes.

In the Miss Marple novels, many of which are set in the sleepy English village of St. Mary Meade, Christie introduces Miss Marple early on, then proceeds to parade a few characters who may later become possible suspects before the murder takes place, usually in the first thirty to forty pages. Such is the case with Murder at the Vicarage. Miss Marple joins the reader in chapter one. Then there follows about thirty pages of background and description of the residents and relationships of people in the village who will turn out to be possible suspects. The murder occurs at the beginning of chapter five. In this case, the opening does work to establish Miss Marple's credibility as an amateur sleuth. "She's the worst cat in the village," says the vicar's wife, Griselda. "And she always knows every single thing that happens--and draws the worst inferences from it" (4). Since Murder at the Vicarage was Miss Marple's first novel, it was indeed necessary to set her up as a credible sleuth in this one. Also, the mood of peace and serenity could hardly be better established than setting a novel in a vicarage, a seemingly most unlikely place for a murder. St. Mary

Meade, too, would seem a pleasant, quiet place to an outsider. But after learning of its goings-on, the fact that a crime takes place is not wholly surprising.

Following the same formula of concentrating on the setting first is the method Christie uses to introduce her popular Murder on the Orient Express. Poirot appears immediately on page one as a passenger preparing to embark on a fateful train journey through the Orient. As with the rest of her handful of novels set in exotic locales, Christie allows the setting to take over the opening. It is easy to see why Orient Express was especially popular as a film with its colorful scenery and atypical characters. The plot moves along quickly considering the amount of action that takes place, i.e., getting the train under way, describing a hefty number of bizarre passengers, and getting the train stuck in a snowbank, before the murder takes place at the end of chapter four. Again, Poirot already should have been established in the reader's mind as a credible detective, since by 1934 he had appeared in six previous novels. But if there is any doubt, Christie carefully portrays him as a "distinguished stranger" and makes reference to Poirot's past career on the first page. The reader senses his importance by the way the train company employees scurry to find him "suitable" quarters. Then in chapter three, Poirot is seen as an aristocrat who is very selective about his cases when he turns down

M. Rachett. "You do not understand, Monsieur. I have been very fortunate in my profession. I have made enough money to satisfy both my needs and my caprices. I take now only such cases as--interest me," Poirot says (144). This is one of the few times there is the kind of early minor episode that establishes the detective's credibility in Christie as Cawelti describes. In this case, it allows Poirot brief interaction with the intended victim and sets him up as a rather unsavory character with a checkered past. The opening scene is not one of peace and serenity, but it is hardly unpleasant. There is a mood of impending adventure and mystery. A crime four chapters later is not a surprise by contrast but rather a climax to the suspense of the adventure.

These examples show the importance Christie attaches to the opening of her novels. She obviously views the opening as a hook to nab the reader's attention immediately upon picking up the book. She follows this basic principle consistently, but she does vary the tone of the opening. Sometimes it is a calm, tranquil setting, as in Murder at the Vicarage, and sometimes it suggests impending adventure, as in Murder on the Orient Express. She consistently introduces her detective in the first chapter except when she is wildly deviating from the formula as in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. And her detective is always presented as a person of superior intelligence and

intuition. Frequently the opening sets the tone of the entire novel. The sense of suspense set forth in the first few pages of ABC Murders carries through well into the investigation. The mystique of the characters aboard the Orient Express shrouds the investigation as all become linked to a crime in the past. Finally, meticulous details in the opening of Cards on the Table pervade the entire novel as Poirot sniffs out the murderer's identity through careful consideration and attention to the events of the evening.

But as important as the opening of the story is to Christie, equally important are the crime and clues. She follows Cawelti's suggestions that for the crime to be effective, it must be a major incident. In Christie, it is always a murder. Christie complies with Cawelti's assertion that the crime should be surrounded with a good many tangible clues that point to someone; and it must appear to be insoluble. One case where Christie varies the classical detective formula of introducing the detective immediately after the crime is in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, where the story opens with a death of suspicious cause. In most Christies, the murder occurs in the first five chapters or within the first forty pages, allowing the bulk of the novel to focus on the investigation or solving the puzzle. When Christie announces the crime, she uses plain language so the

reader will understand exactly what happened. "And now a passenger lies dead in his berth--stabbed" (Orient Express 149). "I shouted to Caroline, . . . 'They've just found Roger Ackroyd murdered'" (Roger Ackroyd 49). "I pulled myself together and went across to him. His skin was cold to the touch. The hand I raised fell back lifeless. The man was dead--shot through the head" (Murder at the Vicarage 32).

Usually Christie does not color her description of the murder victim with vivid details that she likely would have found offensive, considering her penchant for good taste in all things, or that may offend the sensibilities of her readers. Usually her description of the crime scene goes something like this:

Mr. Shaitana did not answer. His head had fallen forward, and he seemed to be asleep. Race gave a momentary whimsical glance at Poirot and went a little nearer. Suddenly he uttered a muffled ejaculation, bent forward. Poirot was beside him in a minute, he, too, looking where Colonel Race was pointing--something that might have been a particularly ornate shirt stud--but it was not. . . . Superintendent Battle straightened himself. He had examined the thing which looked like an extra stud in Mr.

Shaitana's shirt--and it was not an extra stud. He raised the limp hand and let it fall. (Cards on the Table 390-91)

In The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, the description of the murder victim again is as sanitary as possible. Christie writes:

Ackroyd was sitting as I had left him in the arm chair before the fire. His head had fallen sideways, and clearly visible, just below the collar of his coat, was a shining piece of twisted metalwork. (52)

In her first Miss Marple novel, Christie was a bit more vivid in rendering the murder scene, although hardly measuring up to the coarse language of the hard-boiled detective sagas or the violence-riddled gangster tales of today. This is about as gruesome as Christie gets:

Colonel Protheroe was lying sprawling across my writing table in a horrible, unnatural position. There was a pool of some dark fluid on the desk by his head, and it was slowly dripping onto the floor with a horrible drip, drip, drip. (Murder at the Vicarage 32)

Following the description of the crime, Christie continues with the intricate tangle of clues, usually started in the first few chapters, that while appearing to lead

the reader toward the solution eventually lead him deeper into the web of confusion. Her stories are almost always fairly complicated plots that sprawl in various, seemingly unrelated directions until the detective nicely ties them together at the end. Usually practically everyone in the novel is a suspect, and Christie carefully concocts plots that cast special suspicion on several characters. As the action evolves, so does the intricacy of the relationships. To avoid losing the reader entirely, Christie frequently reiterates the details of the crime. Several times throughout the novel, by way of dialogue or the questioning of suspects, Christie explains the puzzle, sometimes embellishing already-stated clues or adding new ones. The reader is never allowed to share in the thought processes of the detective. The detective is slightly superhuman--at least where intellect, intuition, and reasoning powers are concerned. And to allow his every thought to be revealed would bring him down to the level of the ordinary man and diminish some of his respect. After all, it is the detective who finally is able to tie together loose ends of the case. Only he can fit the pieces of the puzzle together correctly and restore order to the community. It follows, then, that the detective would have to be a cut above the other characters who oftentimes mirror the reader's thoughts and confusion in dialogue. It is important to note one

final significant point on the subject of clues. Christie plays fair with her readers. She always gives them the clues--albeit obscure--to solve the mystery. During the explanation of the solution, reference frequently is made to remote, minor details seized upon by the detective and largely ignored by the audience. A careful Christie reader, or at least one familiar with the Christie formula, will note obvious clues. There are, however, striking details carefully embedded in fairly simple dialogue, a technique of Christie's style that figures largely in her appeal and binds the trust of her readers.

As with most classical detective novels, the biggest portion of the story is the investigation. Christie parades a series of suspects, witnesses, and possible solutions the reader thinks will clarify the case and solve the mystery. This parade of suspects frequently leads the reader into further confusion until he finally is rescued by the detective. Throughout this section, Christie continues to reiterate the facts of the crime. This repetition allows the reader to recall significant events, motives, and alibis even if he missed them in a quick reading or he forgot or overlooked a key element in the case.

In the Hercule Poirot novels, the methodical, mustached little Belgian carries out the investigation.

The audience follows him as he questions suspects and motives and raises questions designed to point to various solutions. Poirot frequently focuses on the psychology of the criminal. For instance, in Cards on the Table, he spends a significant amount of time examining the bridge hands of the four suspects. By studying the scores of the hands, he tries to evaluate the suspects' concentration on the game and thereby determine who was preoccupied with murderous intentions. Christie warns readers they have picked up a murder mystery in a foreword to the novel. Since it is rare for Christie to address the reader and comment on her work in this way and because of the relevance of her words on the subject under consideration, the complete foreword deserves quotation:

There is an idea prevalent that a detective story is rather like a big race--a number of starters--likely horses and jockeys. "You pays your money and you takes your chances!" The favorite is by common consent the opposite of the favorite on a race course. In other words he is likely to be a complete outsider! Spot the least likely person to have committed the crime and in nine times out of ten your task is finished.

Since I do not want my faithful readers to fling away this book in disgust, I prefer to

warn them beforehand that this is not that kind of book. There are our four starters and any one of them, given the right circumstances, might have committed the crime. That knocks out forcibly the element of surprise. Nevertheless there should be, I think, an equal interest attached to four persons, each of whom has committed murder and is capable of committing further murders. They are four widely divergent types; the motive that draws each one of them to crime is peculiar to that person, and each one would employ a different method. The detection must, therefore, be entirely psychological, but it is none the less interesting for that, because when all is said and done it is the mind of the murderer that is of supreme interest.

I may say, as an additional argument in favor of this story, that it was one of Hercule Poirot's favorite cases. His friend, Captain Hastings, however, when Poirot described it to him, considered it very dull! I wonder with which of them my readers will agree. (378)

Christie seems to feel she is experimenting with a new technique in Cards on the Table. Of course, she is not. In most of her novels, any one of her suspects,

"given the right circumstances," could be the guilty party. Certainly leaving readers to suspect several characters is further evidence of her skill in writing the investigative sections of her novels in the spider web style--with each strand pointing equally to someone else but with the confusion gracefully tied up at the end. Furthermore, by attaching "equal interest" to the four suspects, Christie does not load the case against anyone. Note, too, that Christie is aware of the convention in many detective stories to have the "least-likely person" commit the crime. She prefers another approach--focusing on the psychological state or the "mind of the murderer." Finally, she was obviously concerned, from her last paragraph, that the reader like the novel. Since Christie included a foreword or opening author's note in only a handful of novels, it is hard to reason why she wrote one in any case. It is possible that a foreword is more experimental writing on her part. Perhaps she felt it would further reader enjoyment and understanding of the novel. Regardless, she obviously was not especially fond of the technique or she would have used it more. Actually it is only the inclusion of a foreword that makes Cards on the Table unique.

In case the reader missed the direction of Cards on the Table in the foreword, he is reminded in chapter eight when Superintendent Battle says to Poirot, "I'd

like to know what you think of the psychology of these four people. You're rather hot on that" (409). And, following Christie's expressed intention, she had Poirot reply:

You are right--psychology is very important. We know the kind of murder that has been committed, the way it was committed. If we have a person who from the psychological point of view could not have committed that particular type of murder, then we can dismiss that person from our calculations. We know something about these people. We have our own impressions of them, we know the line that each has elected to take, and we know something about their minds and their characters from what we have learned about them as card players and from the study of their handwriting and of these scores. But alas! It is not too easy to give a definite pronouncement. This murder required audacity and nerve--a person who was willing to take a risk. (409-410)

Christie even includes diagrams to aid the reader in following the investigation. In Cards on the Table, copies of the bridge scores, which have been shown to be a significant clue in the case, are included; but frequently the diagram is a map of the town or the design of

the murder site, i.e., the location of various cabins on a ship or train or the location of furniture in a room. It is not uncommon for a Christie reader to return frequently to the diagram to recall the locations of suspects or where events took place while reading the investigative section. No doubt Christie, herself, referred to these diagrams frequently during her writing because her details always are perfectly accurate.

In the investigative section, Christie will often focus an entire chapter on one suspect, then on another, thereby giving each character equal attention. By the end of each chapter, the reader is convinced that particular character is guilty, indicating the success of Christie's plan as stated in the foreword. She takes this approach in Cards on the Table and also in Murder on the Orient Express, a particularly intriguing novel that taps the reader's recollection of an actual crime for comparison. In this case, the Armstrong kidnapping, which is at the core of the murder on the Orient Express, cannot help but lead one to remember the famous Lindbergh kidnapping of 1932. Orient Express was published in 1934 at a time when the Lindbergh case was fresh in the minds of many--and obviously Christie as well. It is an intriguing novel and one that develops rapidly in the investigative section. Devoting individual chapters to suspects allows Christie to offer background on the dozen who were present

at the time of the murder and suggest possible motives as well as to focus "equal attention" on each suspect. Of course, in Orient Express as in many Christies, the clues are tied together at the end in her usual clever way. The reader can follow Poirot's investigation, but it is not always clear what direction his "little gray cells" are taking until the end.

Murder on the Orient Express is structured slightly different from other Christie novels. The crime takes place in Part I, a series of eight chapters. Part II, fifteen chapters, makes up the investigation; and Part III, nine chapters, brings the solution. Death on the Nile, published three years later, is similarly structured. Death on the Nile is broken up into two sections, the first setting up the situation, and the second including the crime, investigation, and solution. This was obviously a workable plan since these are two of Christie's most popular pieces. This breaking down of the novel into clearly defined phases allows readers to know exactly where they are at all times during the course of the novel and was no doubt an aid to her in writing. It further shows that Christie was highly organized both in technique and theme, a topic to be discussed later.

In Murder on the Orient Express, the diagram of the coach appears immediately as the investigative section

opens in the first chapter of part two. Poirot holds a "court of inquiry" in which he takes evidence from all the passengers and some of the employees on the line. The section is the perfect example of Cawelti's parade-of-suspects device, carefully written to reveal background, motive, alibi, and the subtle nuances of character as well as vivid descriptions. Describing one suspect, the Russian princess, Christie writes:

Her small, toad-like face looked even yellower than the day before. She was certainly ugly, and yet, like the toad, she had eyes like jewels, dark and imperious, revealing intent energy and an intellectual force that could be felt at once. Her voice was deep, very distinct, with a slight grating quality in it.

(183)

With such a vivid description, the reader can picture the Russian princess as an ugly, slightly mysterious-looking woman one might be reluctant to confront. Poirot, however, never reluctant to confront anyone, a few lines later asks her to provide a brief account of her movements from dinner onward on the night of the murder. Her answer is typically Christie, revealing intimate details, personality, and leaving some doubt about an important element--in this case and in many Christie novels, time. She quotes the Russian princess:

I directed the conductor to make up my bed whilst I was in the dining-car. I retired to bed immediately after dinner. I read until the hour of eleven, when I turned out my light. I was unable to sleep owing to certain rheumatic pains from which I suffer. At about a quarter to one I rang for my maid. She massaged me and then read aloud till I felt sleepy. I cannot say exactly when she left me. It may have been half an hour, it may have been later. (183)

Because the Russian princess cannot say exactly what time her maid left her, she becomes even more mysterious and suspicious.

Christie varies her formula from Cards on the Table and Murder on the Orient Express in The ABC Murders. In Cards on the Table and Orient Express, the investigative section focuses on solving crimes that have already taken place earlier. In The ABC Murders, suspense builds for more murders throughout the investigation. In the opening of The ABC Murders, Poirot gets a letter warning him of a crime to be committed. While Poirot searches for the identity of the "madman" who is sending the notes, he tries to help the police prevent further crimes. Poirot figures out fairly quickly that there will be a series of murders following the alphabet, so his investigation takes

a certain route. Every time the action slows, another letter is received and another murder is committed, keeping suspense high. Poirot takes his usual deductive approach. It is especially pertinent here that he would be aiming again at the psychology of the criminal since he still is at large and still is active. Poirot says midway through the novel:

I think I've got the psychology of the case fairly clear. Dr. Thompson will correct me if I'm wrong. I take it that every time ABC brings a crime off, his self-confidence increases about a hundred per cent. Every time he feels "I'm clever--they can't catch me!" he becomes so overweeningly confident that he also becomes careless. He exaggerates his own cleverness and every one else's stupidity. Very soon he'd be hardly bothering to take any precautions at all. That's right, isn't it, doctor? (299)

Once more, Christie employs strict organization. Even though suspense builds in The ABC Murders and there is no parade of suspects, the novel moves along a definite pattern. A letter is received by Poirot threatening a crime; a murder takes place; the investigation intensifies. Christie follows the scheme three times, building evidence along the way; and after the third murder moves

on to the solution. Fortunately for the reader, "ABC," as the murderer is called in the novel, did not make it through twenty-six crimes! The potential is there; the organization is there. It is perhaps the prospect of a long series of murders that bores the reader. But Christie makes a concerted effort to inject further action and suspense when the reader's interest lags. In the end, however, Poirot explains, "The Mystery was not the mystery of the murders, but the mystery of ABC" (366). If that is Christie talking through Poirot, she is again linking her novels under the topic of psychology of the criminal as her main interest. Despite the fact that The ABC Murders varies her conventional formula somewhat, it still works because it is fundamentally true to Christie's form. Cawelti says that "originality is welcomed only in the degree that it intensifies the expected experience without fundamentally altering it" (9). Considering the fact that The ABC Murders was published in 1936 between Murder on the Orient Express and Cards on the Table, and during what is generally thought to be Christie's peak period of popularity, one can hardly dispute that it was an experimental novel. It is flawed because it strays too far from her formula, but it is original and successfully experimental.

If in 1936 Christie was confident enough as a writer to experiment with her style, in 1926 she was just finding

her way. With a repertoire of only six books before the controversial Murder of Roger Ackroyd was published in 1926, Christie again varied her formula, but this time the public did not respond as favorably. The crux of the problem with The Murder of Roger Ackroyd lies in the announcement of the solution, to be discussed later. But Christie did basically follow her usual plan in the investigative section. There are the usual diagrams of the murder site, in this case Ackroyd's home, shown in chapter five, and the study, detailed in chapter seven. There are several instances where Christie recaps the crime and clues and the suspects. In fact, in the midst of the investigation, in chapter eight, Inspector Ragland hands Poirot a sheet of paper, carefully reproduced, that lists each suspect and his whereabouts at various times on the night of the murder. Again, it is a highly structured novel as Poirot gathers evidence. Christie devotes entire chapters to individual characters to set up their stories and relationships. Several times throughout the novel, possible theories are offered as the investigation ensues. Even though Poirot subtly focuses on psychology, in this novel the emphasis is not as pronounced. He says in chapter thirteen, "Me, I am very skilled in psychology" (137). But his emphasis, and clearly the emphasis of the investigative section of the novel, is on method--clues and details. He says in chapter ten: "Method, order;

never have I needed them more. Everything must fit in-- in its appointed place--otherwise I am on the wrong track" (118). As Christie presents Poirot's possible theories and clues, which are not as smoothly handled in Roger Ackroyd as in her later novels, the state of confusion intensifies for the reader. It is perhaps this extreme focus on clues and minute details that dilutes reader enjoyment of the novel. One becomes somewhat bogged down. In the following passage, the emphasis becomes clear:

I, too, looked around. "If those walls could speak," I murmured.

Poirot shook his head. "A tongue is not enough," he said. "They would have to have also eyes and ears. But, don't be too sure that these dead things"--he touched the top of the bookcase as he spoke--"are always dumb. To me they speak sometimes--chairs, tables--they have their message!" He turned away towards the door. (89)

It is clear that Poirot's watchword of "method, order, and the little gray cells" (91) is established, and it will follow him throughout his career. But as Christie turns away from the compulsive detailing of every element in the case and moves toward a concentration on psychology, her style improves. The novels read better, are less tedious, and are far more enjoyable.

Of course, Miss Marple's first case, Murder at the Vicarage, shows even more development of Christie as a writer. Changing detectives meant a slight change in the technique. Poirot is not present in the Miss Marple stories to lead the investigation. Frequently police inspectors are on hand, but it is Miss Marple who solves the case in the end. Despite the fact that Christie has said she liked her spinster sleuth far more than the ridiculous-looking Belgian, it took a while for her to learn how to smoothly inject her into the investigation. In Murder at the Vicarage, Miss Marple is conspicuously absent for a good portion of the investigation with Inspector Slack and other characters carrying out most of the probe. When she is referred to, it is rather incidental as a nosy old cat. Miss Marple entered Christie's novels rather early, in 1930, but her formula was taking shape, and Murder at the Vicarage fits it.

There is the same basic structure in Murder at the Vicarage as in other Christie novels, with the investigation taking up most of the narrative. After the murder victim is found early in chapter five, a diagram is included as the investigation begins. This time it is a plan of the study where Colonel Protheroe's body was found. Earlier there was a diagram showing the relationship of Miss Marple's house and garden to the vicarage and later a map of St. Mary Meade. Again, it is obviously

important to Christie for her readers to have all the details presented as clearly as possible. Including three diagrams in one novel indicates her emphasis on location and gives the reader every opportunity to turn his mind's eye upon Christie's mental picture.

The investigation proceeds much the same as in other Christies, except that without Poirot there is no superior intellect guiding the probe. Inspector Slack and the vicar pursue most of the clues, but they are ordinary men who get sidetracked and miss important details. It is evident from this first Miss Marple novel that Christie is struggling with a method to get the old lady actively involved in the case. In subsequent stories her presence is extended, and she is more vocal all along. In Murder at the Vicarage, however, she is absent a good deal from the middle of the probe and only resurfaces somewhat later after Slack, the vicar, and others have floundered around a good bit seeking a solution to the mystery. Miss Marple finally intervenes rather late in the novel with a theory about the case she presents to the vicar. Christie recapitulates the facts, suspects, and times in chapter twenty-six as she has done earlier in the novel. And Miss Marple finally takes on a bit of Poirot's aloofness when at the end of that chapter she indicates she has solved the crime but refuses to reveal the answer at the present. She had enumerated seven suspects earlier,

and she explains her method in a discussion with the vicar. She says:

You see . . . living alone as I do, in a rather out of the way part of the world one has to have a hobby. There is, of course, woolwork, and Guides, and Welfare, and sketching, but my hobby is--and always has been--Human Nature. So varied--and so very fascinating. And, of course, in a small village, with nothing to distract one, one has such ample opportunity for becoming what I call proficient in one's study. One begins to class people, quite definitely, just as though they were birds or flowers, group so and so, genus this, species that. Sometimes, of course, one makes mistakes, but less and less as time goes on. And then, too, one tests oneself. One takes a little problem . . . a quite unimportant mystery, but absolutely incomprehensible unless one solves it right. . . . It is so fascinating, you know, to apply one's judgment and find that one is right.

(194-95)

Also like Poirot, Miss Marple is one who concentrates on method and psychology. And, also like Poirot, each

subsequent Miss Marple novel focuses on the psychology of the criminal. In Murder at the Vicarage, it seems that Christie, too, was compulsively conscious of presenting a clearly logical case--one that could be plotted out and explained away with careful attention to details. Miss Marple says in the novel she has been reading "a lot of American detective stories from the library lately . . . hoping to find them helpful" (196). The emphasis is clearly on logic and method. Miss Marple, a few lines later, adds:

The point is . . . one must provide an explanation for everything. Each thing has got to be explained away satisfactorily. If you have a theory that fits every fact--well, then it must be the right one. But that's extremely difficult. (193)

One could almost imagine Poirot saying those same words. It is becoming clear that Miss Marple and Poirot were merging closer in fundamental approach although they maintained their own distinct personalities throughout Christie's career. Christie, by 1930, was defining her formula and helping reader expectations to form. Conscious of her style, she forged ahead into her most popular period and forty more years of writing.

While the investigative sections of Christie's novels show the most creativity and development, the last three

components of Cawelti's formula for detective fiction-- announcement of solution, explanation of solution, and denouement--are dispensed with in fairly short order. The announcement of solution segment is usually anticlimactic, the real interest being on the development and explanation of the puzzle. After the detective summons the suspects and all the evidence is presented, the criminal usually confesses. Frequently, however, Christie stretches the investigative section with false finishes. It is not uncommon for an innocent character to confess to the crime. But that always happens several chapters before the novel ends. It is a Christie convention to have the final confession-solution occur at the very end, followed by a brief explanation usually by the detective and then sometimes a quick denouement. Of course, once the reader knows who and how, there is little left to say.

Cards on the Table is an example of a Christie false finish. At the end of chapter twenty-five, Mrs. Lorrimer confesses that she killed Shaitana. Christie always writes these lines unemotionally and simply. "'And yet--' She leaned forward, her waving hand stopped. 'I did kill Shaitana, M. Poirot. . .'" (476). In the next chapter, she explains how the murder was committed, and Poirot begins to discredit her. The novel, several chapters from being over, continues with additional clues, heightened suspense, and another murder attempt before finally, at

the end of chapter thirty, the real murderer confesses. As Poirot assembles the suspects, presents the evidence, and confronts the killer, Roberts confesses. Christie writes:

The mention of those two names finished Roberts. He leaned back in his chair.

"I throw in my hand," he said. "You've got me! I suppose that sly devil Shaitana put you wise before you came that evening. And I thought I'd settled his hash so nicely."
(493-94)

Cawelti suggests that the identification of the criminal is the climax and turning point of the novel. It is in a sense a climax because the reader discovers the solution to the puzzle and confirms or discounts his prime suspect in the game. However, the revelation of the killer's identity really is an anticlimax. Once the reader knows who it is, the only interest he has left is a brief explanation before he will quit the book. Furthermore, it is the turning point in the novel, as Cawelti suggests, because the reader at that point begins to see the story from the detective's point of view. To illustrate this change in point of view, Christie has Mrs. Oliver, after the confession and arrest in Cards on the Table, asserting, "I always said he did it" (494). Observing characters in the novels have the same role as

the reader and, thus, may react the same. The puzzle, nevertheless, has been solved, and a quick finish is in order.

Christie similarly handles the announcement of the solution section in Murder on the Orient Express. Again, Poirot assembles the suspects. In the last chapter of the novel, he offers two solutions, the first being the one the authorities will receive and the second being the actual explanation of the events. In this case, the announcement of solution and the explanation merge since the plot is such an intricate one. The only way to identify twelve murderers is through an elaborate account. Poirot complies. As he explains the solution before the actual announcement of the murderers, he says he was struck by the fantastic evidence that pointed to all twelve suspects.

I said to myself, "This is extraordinary-- they cannot all be in it!"

And then, Messieurs, I saw the light. They were all in it. For so many people connected with the Armstrong case to be traveling by the same train by a coincidence was not only unlikely, it was impossible. It must not be chance, but design. I remember a remark of Colonel Arbuthnot's about trial by jury. A jury is composed of twelve people--there were

twelve passengers--Rachett was stabbed twelve times. And the thing that worried me all along--the extraordinary crowd traveling in the Stamboul-Calais coach at a slack time of year was explained.

Rachett had escaped justice in America. There was no question as to his guilt. I visualized a self-appointed jury of twelve people who condemned him to death and were forced by their own exigencies of the case to be their own executioners. And immediately, on that assumption, the whole case fell into beautiful shining order. (250)

It is finally Mrs. Hubbard who confesses for the group, explaining how each participant was involved and what role each took to perfect the plan. Poirot calls the murder plot a "perfect mosaic" and a "cleverly planned jig-saw puzzle." But those words also can describe the novel. It is because "the whole thing was a cleverly planned jig-saw puzzle" (250) that Murder on the Orient Express was Christie's best novel. Every minute detail is worked out beforehand like the murder in the story. It is ingenuously structured, original but adhering fundamentally to her formula. Christie follows Cawelti's components for formula mystery up through the investigation, then inverts the explanation and the announcement

of the solution sections, and fairly dispenses with the denouement. Once the solution is suggested, the novel abruptly ends. Poirot says, "having placed my solutions before you, I have the honour to retire from the case . . ." (253). That ending shows a "stop while you are ahead" technique that Christie uses. The story is over when the reader reaches the detective's level of awareness of the case. Knowing further details are of little use and interest, Christie chooses a quick close. This device intensifies the dramatic quality of the detective's explanation and leaves the reader on a high note, ensuring a positive reaction and a thirst for more.

Somewhat similarly, at the height of suspense in The ABC Murders, Poirot wraps up the case of the psychopathic killer. As usual, Poirot assembles the characters, but in this case it is not a collection of suspects but rather members of the Special League or interested parties out to nab the criminal. He reiterates the facts of the case, and it is clear that he has a solution. In the next chapter, devoted to Alexander Bonaparte Cust, Poirot confronts him with the evidence and asserts, "But you do know, don't you . . . that you committed the murders." Cust simply confesses, "Yes . . . I know" (366). There is little satisfaction for the reader at the announcement of the solution in this novel because for several pages the facts have pointed to Cust. Because the novel is structured

around a homicidal maniac who continues to strike when the action lags, the resolution becomes less dramatic. Christie usually takes the spider web approach where all strands point to a different suspect, any of whom could have accomplished the crime under certain conditions and many of whom have motives. But in The ABC Murders, the novel moves in one direction. As letters of warning are received and new murders are committed, the plot continuously moves toward a single suspect. While the suspense builds in the narrative, the dramatic quality of the investigation wanes. There is less of an intricate puzzle and more of a simple "whodunnit." So, in this case the confirmation of Cust's guilt rather than the solution to a complicated puzzle is anticlimactic. Few readers would be unable to conclude who the criminal is by the time they reach the announcement of the solution since the plot has been moving toward him for some time. And, because of that, reader satisfaction in the novel is diminished. ABC Murders is another example of Christie experimenting with her form. In this case, she goes a little too far in deviating from her proven formula, making the novel interesting but not one of her best.

Murder at the Vicarage, on the other hand, is fairly typical Christie. She again uses the device of false conclusion. Near the end of the novel much of the

evidence points to Hawes, but Miss Marple sees through a set-up and deduces that the real murderers are Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe. The announcement comes at the end of chapter twenty-nine, a full three chapters before the end of the book. In order to avoid loss of reader interest, Christie tries to continue the story by allowing Miss Marple to devise a trap to nab Redding. Ordinarily, the explanation is in order immediately following the announcement of solution. But Christie, perhaps, wanted to extend Miss Marple's presence in the novel, which already has been said to be lacking. If at the end of Murder at the Vicarage Christie saw Miss Marple emerging like Poirot, as has been suggested, she may have wanted to flesh out her role in the solution/explanation of the case, thereby increasing her credibility as a detective. Certainly subsequent Miss Marple novels find her more actively involved in the plot. Nevertheless, the explanation, of course, given by Miss Marple, must be included before the trap can be arranged and the plot can progress. Christie's plan, however, does not work as well as Miss Marple's. The only follow-up to the trap the reader sees is the first line of the final chapter: "There is little more to be told. Miss Marple's plan succeeded" (226). It is odd that Christie would set the reader up for additional action and then cut it off abruptly. Either she realized attention could not be sustained much longer or

she merely chose to end it quickly and easily. The novel was reaching her limit in terms of length, so either conclusion is possible. The ending, however, is flawed.

Finally, there is no confession of Lawrence Redding or Anne Protheroe as in many Christies. Instead, there is only an indirect reference to "the trial of Lawrence Redding and Anne Protheroe" (226). In an explanation of the denouement, it will show that Christie is moving out of the main story line for the ending. Despite a few flaws, Murder on the Vicarage is a successful novel, adhering basically to the Christie formula. Since it was written in 1930 as the first Miss Marple novel, one can understand and accept a few minor flaws. It did, however, bring forth the sleuth who was to become Christie's favorite and certainly a favorite of her readers.

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, however, did not fare nearly as well. Written early in her career, the novel caused public outcry when it was revealed in the last chapter that the narrator was the murderer. Christie was charged with not playing fair with her readers, slipping them an undeserved turn that would cheat them out of rationally solving the puzzle. Actually Roger Ackroyd follows the Christie formula well as it had progressed up to then. After the investigation, Poirot assembles the suspects and confronts them with the facts

of the case. He suggests motive and opportunity; and it is still, a dozen pages before the end of the novel, a mystery who the criminal is. But when Poirot confronts Dr. Sheppard, the narrator, the reader gets a surprise. It is not until the final chapter that Sheppard confesses, and it is a rather indirect statement. "I suppose I must have meant to murder him all along" (253). Responding to the shock readers expressed after Roger Ackroyd was published, Christie says in her autobiography:

A lot of people say that The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is cheating; but if they read it carefully they will see that they are wrong. Such little lapses of time as there have to be are nicely concealed in an ambiguous sentence, and Dr. Sheppard, in writing it down, took great pleasure himself in writing nothing but the truth, though not the whole truth. (410)

Christie says she thinks she "got hold of a good formula" with Roger Ackroyd. Her brother-in-law, James, had complained, "Almost everybody turns out to be a criminal nowadays in detective stories--even the detective. What I would like to see is a Watson who turned out to be the criminal" (410). So, Christie thought about it at length, and her friend, Lord Louis Mountbatten, wrote to her

suggesting an idea for a story "narrated in the first person by someone who later turned out to be the murderer." Christie says she thought it was a "good idea" and seized it (410). Regardless, Roger Ackroyd gives the reader a start. If her game was to cleverly cloud clues so the reader would not stumble upon the solution too early and too easily, Christie was certainly victorious in this novel. It is original, and it must be said that it deviates from the formula the maximum amount without destroying it.

It is difficult to discuss the investigation or the announcement of the solution in Christie without discussing the explanation, because she frequently blends the sections; however, a few words should be said about her use of that component of the formula. Cawelti says the explanation is a high point in a classical detective story because it represents the goal toward which the story has been moving. Certainly most Christie fans savor the lengthy, elegant speeches of Poirot or the quiet reasoning of Miss Marple as the final pieces are placed in the puzzle. More important than the announcement of who committed the crime is the dissertation on how and why the crime was committed and which clues led to its solution. Wells contends that Poe's idea of what made a detective story interesting was not "the fascination of the mystery." Rather it was the interest the reader would have

in "following the successive steps of reasoning by which the crime was ferreted out." That, in turn, made the reader an "analytical observer who not only delights in the mental ingenuity exhibited by the detective, but actually joins with him in working out the intricacies of a problem which, though at first seemingly insoluble, is at length mastered entirely." The reader is left admiring the detective but also delighted in his own unraveling of the web the author has woven for him (62).

Christie obviously also delighted in a carefully written explanation. In most cases the detective is given an entire chapter in order to unravel the details of the case. The explanation follows a strict formula in her novels. The detective, especially in the Poirot stories, calls for all the suspects and interested parties to be assembled in a room. Poirot, in his typically elegant style, addresses those present, reiterating the facts of the case and reviewing motives and opportunity. Oftentimes he will eliminate various suspects, and at the end of his lengthy discourse will confront the murderer. The criminal may reject the evidence at first, but after additional prodding by the detective will admit his guilt. Of course the possibility of premature false confessions has been discussed earlier. But the reader can usually tell when the real one is at hand. It is always within a very few pages of the end of the novel, usually twenty at

the most; and if it is a confession by the real criminal, the detective will accept it, perhaps offer a few closing remarks, but not necessarily, and then will depart. When the explanation has been given, there is little more to say, the questions have all been answered, and the reader quickly loses interest, realizing that the mystery is over. A quick close is always in order, Christie being no exception. Occasionally she will include a surprise ending, perhaps detailing a previously unknown relationship, but it is written in an efficient way and does not bog the reader down with further tiresome details. When the explanation is given, the reader is elevated to the detective's perspective, which usually brings the reader pleasure. As Cawelti says, it is the same unique satisfaction felt when a puzzle is successfully solved. Order is restored, and all again is right with the world.

In Christie's most successful novels, the explanation focuses as much on the psychology of the case and criminal as the deductive reasoning used to reach the conclusion. For instance in Cards on the Table, Poirot begins his explanation by saying:

This case to my mind has been one of the most interesting cases I have ever come across. There was nothing, you see, to go upon. There were four people, one of whom must have committed the crime but which of

the four? Was there anything to tell one?

In the material sense--no. There were no tangible clues--no fingerprints--no incriminating papers or documents. There were only--the people themselves. (494)

Likewise in The ABC Murders, Poirot opens his discourse explaining that "the mystery was not the mystery of the murders, but the mystery of ABC" (366). Poirot allows his intuition to take over, combines it with tangible clues, synthesized in his "little gray cells," and unravels the mystery, carefully tying all the loose ends in the explanation. He proudly details how he arrived at the solution and sometimes why others did not, breaking down false clues and errant leads.

If one clue seems to be presented as the far and above most important one in the case--like time is in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd--the explanation examines its developing significance. Time is so important in Roger Ackroyd that Poirot begins his explanation by saying, "It was the little discrepancy in time that first drew my attention to you (the murderer)--right at the beginning" (249). The reader should remember, however, that Roger Ackroyd has much more of a focus on tangible clues than the psychology of the case and is, therefore, atypical of Christie's most popular books.

The explanation in Miss Marple novels is more subtle, owing, naturally, to the difference in character. The aforementioned generalizations continue to hold up, with slight variations. There may not be the formal gathering of suspects, but most of the interested parties are on hand at the end of the novel. Miss Marple is the one who explains her solution, but it is in a decidedly less pretentious tone than Poirot's explanations. Rather than confronting the murderer and intimidating him into a confession, Miss Marple simply states who the guilty party is and why. A confession does not necessarily follow. Though still aloof and detached, Miss Marple takes a more humane approach to her cases, presenting her theories in a humble tone without Poirot's overconfidence and conceit. But, like Poirot, she focuses on the psychology of the case and her intuition about human nature. Miss Marple undergoes somewhat of a transformation in Murder at the Vicarage. At the beginning, she is a terrible old cat. She is absent for a good portion of the middle of the novel. Finally, in the explanation section, she is shown as an authority on firearms and murder. The narrator indicates this transformation and rise in Miss Marple's respect and credibility when he says: "There was something fascinating in Miss Marple's resume of the case. She spoke with such certainty that we both felt that in this way and in no other could the crime have

been committed" (219). Of course, as mentioned earlier, this was Christie's Miss Marple debut, and the indecisiveness about how her character should react is obvious. In later Miss Marple novels, she moves somewhat closer to Poirot's handling of the explanation but still maintains that decorum readers have grown to expect.

Finally, Miss Marple novels dispense with the mystery as efficiently as the Poirot stories. There are possibilities for surprise endings and the revelation of hidden relationships. But they are nicely written, subtly drawing the reader to the detective's point of view. Once the truth is known, Miss Marple takes her leave, and the novel concludes. Again order has been restored to the fictional world.

Not all Christies have a formal denouement; and when they do, it is usually very brief, probably due to the waning reader interest. The denouement sometimes has little to do with the main story line. Of the five novels being examined here, only three--The ABC Murders, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, and Murder at the Vicarage--have what can be called a formal denouement. The other two, Murder on the Orient Express and Cards on the Table, end abruptly. In Orient Express, Poirot offers his two solutions to the case to the director of the line and then politely retires. The novel ends with ellipses. In Cards on the Table, the explanation is the end. Poirot explains

that there was really no witness to the crime--no window cleaner who saw Dr. Roberts jab Mrs. Lorrimer's arm with a hypodermic, killing her. It was a device the detective used to induce Roberts to confess. When Rhoda asks Poirot about the window cleaner, if no one saw the murderer, Poirot replies: "I saw him. . . . With the eyes of the mind one can see more than with the eyes of the body. One leans back and closes the eyes--" The story closes with a quip from Despard. "Let's stab him, Rhoda, and see if his ghost can come back and find out who did it" (496).

Certainly the lack of a real denouement in some of her novels indicates Christie attached little importance to a formal conclusion. She seemed more inclined to end the story immediately after the case is solved. There is little left to be said, and it is time to move on to another case for Christie and her readers. It also is more dramatic for the detective to present the explanation and then take his leave. Order has been restored to the world of the novel, and it ends on a high note. The mystery has been solved, and all the pieces have been properly fit into the puzzle. The tone is a positive one. The reader is satisfied, perhaps even exhilarated, that the solution has been given and explained. The goal of the novel has been reached.

In those cases where a denouement is present, it is not a significant section of the story. As Cawelti

suggests, the denouement usually is very simple and not concerned with the punishment of the criminal. In The ABC Murders, Poirot recalls a visit from the murderer, Alexander Bonaparte Cust, a few days after the case was solved. Cust tells him he has received an offer from a newspaper to pay "for a brief account of my life and history." Poirot tells him to take the offer but to up the price. Poirot also advises him to visit an oculist for a new pair of glasses to cure "those headaches." Finally, Poirot addresses Hastings. "So Hastings--we went hunting once more, did we not? Vive le sport" (376). One gets the distinct feeling that Poirot--and Christie as well--is saying, "This one is over. Let's get on to the next case."

In the last chapter of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, murderer-narrator Ackroyd finishes his manuscript, the narrative of his case. He gives his side of the incident, which brings the denouement partly back under the category of explanation. He says he is pleased with himself as a writer and plans to mail the manuscript to Poirot. Feeling no pity for Mrs. Ferrars or himself, Ackroyd concludes the novel with the words: "But I wish Hercule Poirot had never retired from work and come here to grow vegetable marrows" (255). Recalling that Roger Ackroyd is not a typical Christie novel, one should note that it does end on a positive note because the crime has

been solved and order has been restored. However, the faint tinge of regret in the narrator's last lines leaves the reader in less than an upbeat mood. Considering the negative reaction Christie got from some about allowing the narrator to be the murderer, the tone of the last line would not have been significant. One probably either leaves Roger Ackroyd with great respect for Christie for having pulled off such a technical coup or is disgusted with the device and feels unsatisfied. Avid Christie readers, however, are likely to take the novel on its own terms regardless of where it ranks among favorites.

The denouement in Murder at the Vicarage is more upbeat. After the case is solved and Miss Marple presents her evidence, she cracks another smaller and fairly unrelated mystery, why Griselda, the vicar's wife, is reading a book of Mother Love. Miss Marple intuits that Griselda is going to have a baby. She says, "My love to dear Griselda--and tell her--that any little secret is quite safe with me." The vicar replies, "Really Miss Marple is rather a dear . . ." (230). Having little to do with the main story line, the ending of Murder at the Vicarage seems simply to be an attempt to close out the novel on a higher note and indicate that the Clements will live happily ever after. The denouement is fairly unnecessary and would detract from the book if it were any longer. Christie's best novels end immediately after

the explanation while the emotion still is intense. All the loose ends of the story have been tied up, and reader satisfaction is at a peak. These little "final touches" are not needed. Christie obviously realized that, or she would have included them consistently.

By examining five novels--The ABC Murders, Murder on the Orient Express, Cards on the Table, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, and Murder at the Vicarage--one can see how Cawelti's formula for classical detective stories can be applied to Agatha Christie's novels. There is some variation as Christie developed her own style and pattern. But the six phases, including introduction of the detective; crime and clues; investigation; announcement of the solution; explanation of the solution; and denouement, generally hold true. A look at how setting and time function in Christie will offer further clues in defining her reader appeal. In the following section Murder on the Orient Express, Death on the Nile, The Body in the Library, A Caribbean Mystery, and Cards on the Table will be examined.

Chapter 3
Setting and Time in Agatha Christie's
Novels

As important as crime and characters are in the classical detective story, so also is the setting. When John Cawelti describes the formula for the classical detective story in his study of formula fiction, he says the story must contain a particular kind of situation, a pattern of action to develop the situation, a certain group of characters, and a definite type of setting appropriate to the story (80). Once again Cawelti looks back at Poe as an early model for detective fiction, saying Poe often set the crime in an isolated place clearly set off from the rest of the world. Cawelti says the combination of the "isolated place and the bustling world outside" often is repeated in the classical detective story. It can be "the locked room in the midst of the city, the isolated country house in the middle of the strange and frightening moors, the walled-in college quadrangle, or the lowly villa in the suburban town," but flipping back and forth from the detective's calm, serene apartment to the locked room full of clues is a convention in Poe and mystery writers who followed him (97).

There are many functions of the setting, the most important of which is providing a limited backdrop against which clues and suspects can be silhouetted. Cawelti says the setting removes the story from the complex outside world and allows the writer to concentrate only on the mystery and not on the larger problems of "social injustice and group conflict" in the outside world. The isolated setting offers a kind of suspense long associated with places removed from the bustling outside world, and in this way the setting for the contemporary mystery is a direct descendant of the Gothic novels, where strange things often happened in a lonely castle or abbey. Gothic novels were nearly always paperbacks ranging from sixty thousand to ninety thousand words and were written by women or under female pseudonyms. According to Russel Nye, "they emphasize atmosphere and mystery (with a castle or old country house as a locale), always involve a woman as a central character, and always have a strong romantic subplot built about a darkly attractive male figure" (49). Gothic novels are characterized by "horror, violence, supernatural effects and a taste for the medieval," and they are usually "set against a background of Gothic architecture, especially a gloomy and isolated castle" (Benet 412). The setting in the detective story provides a contrast between the site of the crime and the busy outside world, which "constitutes a symbolic representation of the relation between order and chaos, between

surface rationality and hidden depths of guilt" (97).

Frequently, the mystery opens in the calm, rational order of the detective's apartment and then transports the reader to the scene of the crime, a place that has been disrupted by chaos and where strange clues have been left behind. Cawelti says, "By solving the secret of the locked room, the detective brings the threatening external world under control so that he and his assistant can return to the peaceful serenity of the library, or can restore the pleasant social order of the country house" (97).

In addition, the setting in the mystery creates a mood reminiscent of Victorian novels. With this mood come values and manners that were appropriate to the period. This function of the setting is minimal in Poe; but in Doyle and other twentieth-century detective novelists, it allows for rich sketches of local color, which provide "both an air of verisimilitude and an added source of interest to the main theme of investigation" (Cawelti, 97-98). Such sketches symbolize the peaceful order of society disrupted by the crime and restored when the detective solves the case. Cawelti says, "Many twentieth-century writers of classical detective stories reflect the nineteenth-century novel in their treatment of society in the form of nostalgic fantasies of the more peaceful and harmonious social order associated with the traditional rural society of England" (97-98).

It already has been shown that Cawelti's formula for detective fiction fits Agatha Christie in terms of situation and pattern of action. By looking at five novels--Murder on the Orient Express, Death on the Nile, A Caribbean Mystery, Cards on the Table, and The Body in the Library--one can see the great importance Christie attached to setting and time in her novels. These novels represent the great pains Christie took to develop a setting that plays a unique role in her novels. Sometimes the setting is an exotic locale such as Egypt or a Caribbean island. Sometimes the setting is a quiet little hamlet nestled in the English countryside. But regardless, the setting is always, as Cawelti suggests is common in detective fiction, an isolated place with little contact with the outside world. What frequently starts out as a calm, serene setting is transformed into chaos when a murder is committed. In Christie, as with other contemporary mystery writers, setting functions as a limited backdrop for the clues and suspects. The audience's attention is never focused on the active stream of human activity in the outside world or on social injustice, but always on the mystery at hand. The stories always move in a cyclical pattern from the peace or normalcy of life in the opening pages, then to the crime and investigation, and finally back to an ordered world when the detective announces the solution and explanation and the novel ends. In other words, the novel is always moving,

back toward the order that existed in the first few pages before the murder.

Furthermore, the setting in Christie's novels satisfies a sense of nostalgia for the genteel, proper world of the Victorian novels. Even in her exotic locales, there is an air of verisimilitude and a sense of decorum. The setting always represents the proper world where manners and genteel living are paramount. Mystery writers, including Christie, often reach back to the early nineteenth century when verisimilitude and decorum were the order of the day. Modern writers long for a time in the past when things were better--less chaotic and more ordered. And Christie, writing in the early twentieth century, is no exception. She was born in 1890 in Torquay, England, a fashionable resort and a world of tea parties, domestic servants, money, taste, and leisure (Morgan 7-8). She was a product of the Victorian era, and her sense of Victorian values bridged the pessimism and realism of the Industrial Revolution to lend her novels a nostalgic tone. She longed for order but accepted the chaos. Injecting chaos in her novels and setting the crimes in isolated places took the chaos out of the real world and left it unblemished by evil. Evil is always present but controlled and self-contained in an isolated locale in the world and conquered by an outsider, i.e., the detective. When order is restored at the end of the novel, all is

well and the isolated setting again becomes a part of the universe. That technique implies that Christie believed evil can always be controlled and conquered and that it should have no place in the natural world. Evil is against the proper order of the universe; and when it occurs, it is locked away until it can be conquered and removed. Christie, then, is a typical modern writer, longing for the genteel, ordered life portrayed in the novels of the Victorian period.

While Christie does pick exotic locales for a half dozen novels throughout her career, most of the stories are set in the English countryside. Robert Barnard, in his study of Christie, calls the setting an "external fairyland disguised as an English village. . . . It is in fact a segment of a village, not a full picture: it comprises the manor house, the vicarage and a selection of genteel houses of various sizes" (5). Barnard contends that there is little "feel of village life" and that the villages are "interchangeable." Similarly, he adds, "London has no feel of London, Mesopotamia has no feel of Mesopotamia. We are in an eternal no-man's land" (5). Barnard is right. The villages are interchangeable fairylands because they are repeatedly remolded and reused in a variety of mysteries (8). Obviously Christie was comfortable setting her books in the homeland she loved. She was familiar with the English countryside and village

life, so creating that locale for her murders was easy. Christie, furthermore, was widely traveled. She was fascinated by more exotic sites than England and chose these locales a few times perhaps to add color and variety to her canon. It is clear, however, that her favorite setting was England.

A sense of time in Christie matters fairly little except that it is always twentieth century. When it is discernible, it is early to mid-century. She always wrote in contemporary times, so novels written in the 1930s reflect a lifestyle of the 1930s. Novels written later, in the 1940s or 1950s, for example, reflect those times as well with a definite sense of nostalgia for the past. It is obvious in Christie that she appreciated the past and, again like other modern writers, sensed that things were better in the past. By examining five Christie novels, one can see how Christie manipulates setting and time in her novels and how it furthered her appeal as a writer.

Setting is especially important in Murder on the Orient Express, perhaps Christie's best and most popular novel. This novel opens on the platform of the Taurus Express in Syria, en route to the famous journey aboard the Orient Express. The next day when an inordinate number of passengers board the train, the Stamboul-Calais coach, itself,

plays a strong role in the story. Describing the scene in chapter three, one passenger says:

It lends itself to romance. . . . All around us are people of all nationalities, of all ages. For three days these people, these strangers to one another, are brought together. They sleep and eat under one roof, they cannot get away from each other. And at the end of three days they part, they go their separate ways, never, perhaps to see each other again. (140-41)

Obviously, the Orient Express represents an isolated setting operating independently of the outside world. It is a unique setting because it brings together a variety of strangers, congregating them under one roof for three days, and then setting them free to go their separate ways at the end of the journey.

When the train hits the snowdrift in chapter four, the setting becomes even more isolated. Whatever occurs on the train is outside the natural order of the universe. The train stuck in the snow in the far reaches of Yugoslavia is now a setting where evil can occur without disrupting the natural order of the world. Furthermore, the natural order does not exist in this setting. The setting becomes a chaotic scene where a crime is committed and one where criminals and clues abound. Since there is little hope of help from the outside world, the focus of the novel is on

the attempts of one passenger, Christie's Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, to solve the mystery of who killed M. Rachett, an American found stabbed in his berth. Making the mystery more interesting is the fact that the train, blanketed by the snow, allows no opportunity for a murderer to arrive or escape undetected. Thus, the murderer is on board, a fact that injects suspense into an already-captivating story.

In addition to providing an isolated setting for a murder, the Orient Express takes an even more important role. As in late nineteenth-century novels where inanimate objects such as buildings took on the tone of the story and provided the prevailing mood of hopelessness and despair; the train provides the clues to the solution of the mystery in this piece of contemporary detective fiction. This technique is referred to as the pathetic fallacy, "a phrase invented by John Ruskin to designate the illusion that external objects seem actuated by human feelings, particularly when one is under great emotional strain" (Benet 765). Thus, an inanimate object like the Orient Express holds the solution to the mystery and sets the mood of seething passion and untamed evil. At the beginning of Part II, the investigative section of the novel, Christie includes a diagram of the Calais coach, detailing the location of each compartment and the name of each passenger in the compartments. Poirot opens a court of inquiry in the dining car

and proceeds to hear evidence from all on board to sort out the facts and gain evidence in the case. At this point, the detective is beginning the process of restoring order to the world of the novel--the order that existed at the beginning before evil, in the form of a murder, intruded upon the world. As was said earlier, a Christie novel always moves in a cyclical pattern to reestablish the order of the first few pages. As the investigation proceeds, the train is searched to uncover clues and to determine who was where and at what time. As Poirot one time notes, "One cannot complain of having no clues in this case" (159). But as the clues turn up and the solution becomes clear, one senses that the train is moving back into the mainstream of the real world. Order is being restored, and the train is being freed from the snow to continue its journey. In the final chapter, Poirot offers two solutions, one he knows to be the truth and one he will present to the Yugoslavian police when they arrive. That incident further suggests that the murder and evil existed only in the chaotic setting of the snow-bound train; but when the murder is solved and the train freed, evil is conquered and the train once again merges into the mainstream of life. The novel concludes because it is concerned with solving the crime and the pathetic fallacy is over. When the answer to the puzzle is revealed, the story is over, and the Orient Express has accomplished its mission of providing clues.

Another function of setting in Christie's novels is providing a mood reminiscent of the Victorian period. No one is more genteel than Hercule Poirot, and his character always operates strictly within the limits of verisimilitude and decorum. The formal setting of the train with its first-class berths and assiduous attendants complement the formal attitude with which the characters treat each other. There is a pervasive air of polite society among them all. The only one who seems to step outside the framework of gentility is the victim, M. Rachett. He is described as an American with a checkered past, certainly one who does not fit in with the others on board the train. The train, itself, suggests an air of refinement. While Christie does not spend time vividly describing the setting, it is clear that the train is run to appeal to upper-class values. Early in the novel, the employees of the line are seen scurrying around trying to find "appropriate" quarters for one of the status of Hercule Poirot. And throughout, the other passengers show the same air of refinement when they interact with each other and are interviewed by the detective. The Calais coach on the Orient Express is clearly not the place for commoners or one with common manners. Even when murder is injected into the setting, it is not committed by a degenerate. The crime is one committed by the upper class in a first-class setting. While Christie may have felt that evil had no place in the ordered, natural

world, she did recognize that the upper class is as likely to commit crimes as the lower class is. But when her high-society types fall into the clutches of evil and sin, they still maintain their politeness and do so without breaching decorum. Their crime, in this case, is cloaked in the darkness of night in an isolated setting outside the ordered world. Only then would they be able to show their evil natures.

Poirot, perhaps the epitome of Victorian manners, never breaches decorum in his questioning of suspects or searching for clues. He can become accusatory with suspects and verbally berate them into a confession, but he always does it in a pretentious tone. He never succumbs to the level of ordinary, middle-class detective or police interrogator, thereby maintaining his high Victorian manners. Certainly the reader prefers to identify with Poirot and seeks to reach his level of perception about the case. He becomes the paragon of order and manners in the novel and satisfies the reader's nostalgic desire for a time when things were better in the past.

The sense of time in Murder on the Orient Express is typically Christie. Published in 1934, the novel reflects life in the thirties. It does, however, have one important connection with the real world of that decade. Vital to the story is its background about an earlier unsolved kidnapping. Few could read the novel without recalling the

Lindbergh kidnapping of March 1, 1932. The basic facts are similar and may have added to the popularity of the novel. Here was Christie solving a case similar to the one that had eluded authorities in the real world. In this case, time functions only in terms of being contemporary and dealing with contemporary life. If readers enjoy this novel set in the thirties today, it is probably because of its nostalgic value and because it offered a plausible solution to a baffling case in history. There is nothing in Orient Express out of sync with the time of its setting, and it seems to have lost little of its earlier popularity today. It still is a favorite.

Likewise, Death on the Nile, published in 1937, is one of Christie's best novels. One of several Christies set in an exotic locale, Death on the Nile again shows how important setting was to the novelist. Christie takes the same approach in Death on the Nile as with Orient Express; only this time she sets the murder on a steamer cruising down the Nile. She takes considerably more time to set up the relationships and the likelihood of murder in this novel. But once the passengers board the S.S. Karnak and are shown their accommodations, the mood of the drama shifts from one of adventure to one of suspense. Describing the scene as the Karnak gets under way, Christie writes:

There was a savage aspect about the sheet of water in front of them, the masses of rock

without vegetation that came down to the water's edge--here and there a trace of houses abandoned and ruined as a result of the damming up of the waters. The whole scene had a melancholy, almost sinister charm. (545)

One passenger even reflects the sinister mood when she says: "There is something about this country that makes me feel--wicked. It brings to the surface all the things that are boiling inside one. Everything's so unfair--so unjust" (545). This is foreshadowing for a murder. As the steamer moves down the Nile and away from familiar civilization, the mood becomes more sinister. The setting is becoming more isolated, changing from an ordered world into one of disorder. The setting serves both to take the reader away from the outside world so that the crime can be the main focus of the novel and to provide a contrast between the order of the outside world and the disorder of the crime setting.

Socialite Linnet Ridgeway and her new husband, Simon Doyle, board the S.S. Karnak for what they think will be a peaceful, romantic honeymoon away from Doyle's jealous ex-girlfriend, Jacqueline de Bellefort. The foreboding expressed by one passenger is made a reality when, about one-third of the way into the novel, Linnet is found murdered. From then on, the Karnak becomes the backdrop for clues and suspects. Again, Christie elevates the setting

to the role of character. As in Murder on the Orient Express, she includes a diagram of the cabins on the promenade deck, complete with labels indicating where each passenger was assigned. The boat now holds the clues to the truth; and as Poirot begins his investigation, he starts to unravel the incidents, fixing their relationship to various locations on the boat. The ship takes on a mood of evil just as the buildings of late nineteenth-century novels implied a sense of hopelessness and despair. Also, one cannot escape from either setting. The physical setting of naturalistic novels trapped their characters just as the isolated setting of the contemporary mystery traps the criminal, innocent victims, and the clues. As Poirot takes up his inquiry, it is clear the murderer and the clues are trapped on board. There is no chance of outside interference, so the focus is on the mystery alone.

In addition to providing an isolated backdrop for the crime and clues and to show a contrast between the ordered outside world and the chaos caused by the intrusion of murder, the setting in Death on the Nile demonstrates Christie's principle of cyclical development in her novels. The tone moves from order to disorder and back to order with the setting. At the opening of the story, Linnet and Jacqueline are seen as best friends willing to share their most intimate experiences in life. Then, when Linnet steals and marries Jacqueline's boyfriend, the setting

shifts to the unfamiliar locale of Egypt away from the ordered world with which they were familiar. Then as evil further intrudes into the novel, the setting shifts to the steamer, where complete disorder will take over in the form of murders. During the unraveling of events, one senses that the ship is moving out of the depths of chaos back to the ordered world. The ship is moving toward the port of Shellal. Again the detective, Hercule Poirot, is the vehicle for restoring this order. He solves the case of who murdered Linnet and shot Simon Doyle; and when he explains, the cycle is complete, and order is restored. In this novel, Christie chooses to completely destroy the evil forces at work in the novel. Rather than bring the guilty parties to justice, she ends the story with more death. Christie writes:

Jacqueline bent down and tied the lace of her shoe. Then her hand went to her stocking top and she straightened up with something in her hand.

There was a sharp explosive "pop."

Simon Doyle gave one convulsed shudder and then lay still.

Jacqueline de Bellefort nodded. She stood for a minute, pistol in hand. She gave a fleeting smile at Poirot.

Then, as Race jumped forward, she turned the little glittering toy against her heart and pressed the trigger.

She sank down in a soft huddled heap. (662) With Jacqueline's last shots, evil has been dispelled, and the setting has been cleansed. Simon is dead; and Jacqueline, the symbol of evil in the novel, has been destroyed by her own hand. One senses that the world on the Karnak has rejoined the outside world. The bodies and the passengers are taken ashore, and the cycle is complete.

In the last paragraph, Christie provides the final event of the cycle. "But after a while they stopped talking about her (Linnet) and discussed instead who was going to win the Grand National. For, as Mr. Ferguson was saying at that minute in Luxor, it is not the past that matters but the future" (663). The crime is solved, order is restored, and the story is over. Christie allowed evil to intrude in the isolated world on the Karnak, but she conquers it, via Poirot, and removes it when the setting returns to the outside world. Again, she demonstrates that evil has no place in the natural order. Recognizing, however, that it does exist, she places it in an isolated setting, has Poirot conquer it, and returns the setting to the ordered universe without the disorder of evil.

Finally, the setting in Death on the Nile creates a mood reminiscent of the Victorian period. While not

focusing on polite society's obsession with decorum, the novel, by virtue of its inclusion of Hercule Poirot, does emphasize propriety. It is possible that by 1937 when Death on the Nile was published, Christie was moving away from her overt emphasis on proper manners in her novels. Certainly she always wrote in a tone that reflected a personal predisposition toward decorum, but it is not as predominant as her career progressed. As she moved into the 1940s and 1950s, she focused more on the art of detection. The novels of the 1960s show less emphasis on proper manners in general. When Poirot is present as the detective, however--and even when Miss Marple is present, for that matter--there is an underlying tone of gentility. In Death on the Nile, there are members of the upper class; but when they commit murder, they slip from their tower of virtue. Murder favors no class. Poirot, nevertheless, restores one's sense of values in his own flawless behavior and through his probe. He is the model to be emulated. The audience strives to see things from his perspective. Poirot is the epitome of Victorian manners and tries to maintain that attractive air in this novel as well.

As far as time is concerned in Death on the Nile, the novel is another example of Christie's setting the story in a contemporary time frame. The novel could have been set in 1937 or 1947 with little difference. Like Murder on the Orient Express, there is little sense of time in the story.

It is merely contemporary, with people acting the way people acted in the early twentieth century. Read today, however, the novel satisfies one's sense of nostalgia for earlier times. Again Christie, as a modern writer, had a sense that things were better in the past. Many contemporary readers have that same feeling. Picking up a novel set in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s, or even 1950s appeals to today's reader's nostalgic instincts because the reader generally feels that times were less complicated and difficult--i.e., actually better, a few decades ago. A Christie novel fits the bill perfectly even though at publication the novels were in the present seeking a better time in the past.

Another novel that uses setting and time in Christie's unique way is A Caribbean Mystery. Once again Christie furnishes readers with an exotic locale as setting for a murder. Showing Christie's versatility, it is Miss Marple in this case who solves the crime far away from her comfortable St. Mary Meade nestled in the south of England. The novel takes place at the Golden Palm Hotel, a secluded resort in St. Honore in the West Indies. Miss Marple and other guests have arrived at the isolated locale to get away from their busy everyday lives. Their vacation, as expected, turns into a nightmare after a murder. But they are isolated from the outside world. Even the police who come to investigate are part of the tiny community. The setting functions immediately as a backdrop for a crime

and clues. Describing the setting in the first chapter, Christie writes:

So there she was, thought Miss Marple, far from the rigours of the English climate, with a nice little bungalow of her own, with friendly smiling West Indian girls to wait on her, Tim Kendall to meet her in the dining room and crack a joke as he advised her about the day's menu, and an easy path from her bungalow to the sea front and the bathing beach where she could sit in a comfortable basket chair and watch the bathing. There were even a few elderly guests for company. Old Mr. Rafiel, Dr. Graham, Canon Prescott and his sister, and her present cavalier Major Palgrave. . . . Lovely and warm, yes--and so good for her rheumatism--and beautiful scenery, though perhaps--a trifle monotonous? So many palm trees. Everything the same every day--never anything happening. (17)

Of course many things do happen. What starts out as a seemingly paradigm of serenity and order turns quickly to disorder when suspicion is cast on the death of one of the elderly guests, Major Palgrave. Clues begin to spin the web of mystery, and police inspectors and Miss Marple start the process of solving the crime. The ordered world of St. Honore has turned to chaos; and for the next several chapters, the disorder is the focus of the novel. The guests

forget about everything except the crimes. The isolated setting is closed off from the outside world while the evil exists. Christie concentrates on the relationships and motives of the suspects. The only exception is Miss Marple who throughout the investigation strives to find corollaries between the suspects and people she knows at home in St. Mary Meade. But this is Miss Marple's method. She insists that human beings are the same everywhere, for she has made a career out of studying people. Naturally she would make comparisons with others in her past, so that is not an intrusion of the outside world on the isolated world of the crime.

Unlike some of her other novels, A Caribbean Mystery does not include a diagram detailing location of important elements in the setting. Instead Christie verbally describes the resort and events that take place. For example, in chapter twenty-one, Miss Marple dons her sneakers and sets out to do a little sleuthing on her own. Christie describes the scene this way:

She went quietly along the loggia, down the steps and turned right to the path there. Passing between the screen of some hibiscus bushes, an observer might have been curious to see that Miss Marple veered sharply on to the flower-bed, passed round to the back of the bungalow and entered it again through the

second door there. This led directly into a small room that Tim sometimes used as an unofficial office, and from that into the sitting-room.

Here there were wide curtains semi-drawn to keep the room cool. Miss Marple slipped behind one of them. Then she waited. From the window here she had a good view of anyone who approached Molly's bedroom. It was some minutes, four or five, before she saw anything. (185)

While the description is sufficient to lead readers along the route with Miss Marple, there is no real sense of exactness of setting, an element that is vital in Christie's novels. Avid Christie readers expect those little diagrams that show exact details. It can be argued that it is laziness on the part of any reader who will not strive to picture in his mind the setting from a verbal description. But in a murder mystery where clues and exactitude provide the solutions to the puzzle, diagrams are helpful. Because there is no concrete facsimile of the resort, no way to see where the bungalows are situated in relation to each other and in relation to the physical environment, i.e., the sea, woods, etc., the novel does not come alive as her other more successful ones. The reader is playing a guessing game with the setting as well as with the murder. Lack of these details simply prevents the reader from completely entering

the scene because of being unsure of it. This flaw--and the setting can be considered flawed because it is opposed to what Christie readers have come to expect--diminishes the enjoyment somewhat of A Caribbean Mystery. This novel still is entertaining but not nearly so captivating as, say, Murder on the Orient Express or Death on the Nile because there is no way accurately to picture this isolated locale.

In addition to providing a backdrop for the crime and clues and an isolated setting for the novel to focus only on the mystery at hand, the setting again contrasts order and disorder. While there is no physical change in the setting, as in Murder on the Orient Express or Death on the Nile, there is a sense that while the evil is present in the novel--while the case remains unsolved--the world of St. Honore is in chaos. The natural order has been disrupted. Guests become obsessed with the crime and finding the killer. They suspect each other, and they snap at each other. There is an air of distrust as the stress of being present at the site of a crime takes its toll on the characters. The hotel continues to operate, but the focus is no longer on the enjoyment of the guests. The staff and the guests are merely interested in surviving the chaos of the ordeal. When the crime is solved, once again order is restored, this time by Miss Marple; and life goes on. The characters reconnect with the outside world. In the final chapter, the guests are leaving. They bid each other

good-bye and board their planes. The door is closed on the disordered world, and once again evil has been conquered. From the beginning, the novel has been moving in this cyclical pattern. The circle completed, the novel ends.

Except perhaps Poirot, no other character in Christie measures up as a model of Victorian manners better than does Miss Marple. A woman of the world but still a proper Englishwoman, Miss Marple exhibits always the manners of polite society. Even when she is involved in sleuthing, she never strays away from accepted behavior. One can imagine Miss Marple slipping on sneakers and slithering around bungalows to observe mysterious goings-on, but one cannot imagine her approving of the disgraces of a common, contemporary society. She merely accepts them. In investigating a murder, she readily admits that people do act capriciously and selfishly; but she deals with them in a genteel manner. Far less offensive than Poirot at confronting suspects, Miss Marple gets her point across and confronts suspicious clues and characters always in a dignified way. Christie admitted that Miss Marple was her favorite. She portrayed her as a model of propriety and, thus, allowed the novel to treat manners in a style reminiscent of the Victorian novels. The reader strives to attain Miss Marple's perspective of the situation, and, thereby, distances himself from the sordid details of the crime.

Complementing this tone of gentility is the time frame, which again is contemporary. Published in 1964, A Caribbean Mystery is somewhat updated to reflect contemporary times. There are sneakers, and Planters Punch, and common air travel; but there is a sense of nostalgia in her detective. Miss Marple fairly admits that she is old-fashioned. She winces at life today and longs for the more polite society of the past. Christie readers, as stated earlier, have this nostalgia, too; and while Miss Marple in 1964 perhaps sees better times in previous decades, so do many who pick up a Christie today. Regardless of how much Christie tries to update her work to show she is not old-fashioned, her main detective characters are, and that is one of the appeals of her fiction. Fortunately, that element was not lost as her career moved into the 1960s and 1970s.

One of the best examples of a common isolated setting not situated in an exotic locale in Christie is Cards on the Table. In this novel, the crime takes place in the drawing room at Mr. Shaitana's home after a dinner party and during a "pleasant" game of bridge. A description of the setting for the game and the crime sets the mood of the novel, one in which warmth and friendliness shroud impending evil and death. Christie writes:

Always an artist in lighting, Mr. Shaitana had simulated the appearance of a merely firelit room. A small shaded lamp at his elbow gave

him light to read by if he so desired. Discreet floodlights gave the room a subdued glow. A slightly stronger light shone over the bridge table, from whence the monotonous ejaculations continued. (389)

The light is the key to the setting. While giving the appearance of lighting the room, actually the light casts the shadows that will cover the crime. Christie cleverly describes the "flickering firelight" to get the reader ready for murder. The drawing room, sealed off from the rest of the house and the rest of the world, holds the secrets of the crime. After the crime is committed in chapter three, the door opens and a physician and the police enter. They, however, represent the only intrusion of the outside world into the crime scene. The investigation, even when it takes place away from Mr. Shaitana's, concentrates on the drawing room and the clues hidden there. The setting then in Cards on the Table sets the sinister tone and provides a backdrop for the crime and clues. Again, as in most Christies, the setting allows for the intrusion of evil. The disorder of the crime scene contrasts with the friendly, ordered world of the dinner party in the opening of the book and the outside world where order is the norm. Once more, Christie recognizes evil does exist in the world and chooses to confine it to an isolated setting so it can be contained and conquered.

During the investigation section of the novel, Poirot asks the four suspects to describe the bridge hands and the room. Of course, some of them do a better job than others of painting a picture of the crime setting--depending on their concentration on the game, which is a key ingredient in the solution of the case. But all offer some sort of description of the setting, which aids the reader in putting items in their proper place. Perhaps no one does a better job of enumerating the contents of the room than does Dr. Roberts when Poirot interviews him. Dr. Roberts describes what he calls a "collector's room":

Well there was a good deal of furniture. . . .
One large settee upholstered in ivory brocade--
one ditto in green ditto--four or five large
chairs. Eight or nine Persian rugs--a set of
twelve small gilt Empire chairs. William and
Mary bureau. (I feel just like an auctioneer's
clerk.) Very beautiful Chinese cabinet. Grand
piano. There was other furniture but I'm afraid
I didn't notice it. Six first-class Japanese
prints. Two Chinese pictures on looking glass.
Five or six very beautiful snuff-boxes. Some
Japanese ivory netsuke figures on a table by
themselves. Some old silver--Charles I. tazzas,
I think. One or two pieces of Battersea enamel--
. . . A couple of old English slipware birds--

and, I think, a Ralph Wood figure. Then there was some English stuff--intricate silver work. Some jewellery, I don't know much about that. Some Chelsea birds, I remember. Oh, and some miniatures in a case--pretty ones, I fancy. That's not all by a long way--but it's all I can think of for the minute. (421-22)

Poirot responds by pointing out that Dr. Roberts has a "true observer's eye." It is, of course, Christie who has the true observer's eye to picture a room thus furnished and to impart these details accurately to the reader. While this passage does not show all the items in relation to each other, it does give the reader a sense of the order of the room, an order that is disrupted by a murder. Furthermore, it sets a tone of refinery for both Mr. Shaitana and other characters in the story. The setting provides the reader with a sense of nostalgia via antiques.

One function of setting in detective fiction, as stated by Cawelti, is to create a mood reminiscent of the Victorian period. This colorful description provided by Dr. Roberts elevates the novel to a level where refinery is appreciated. Certainly one who furnishes one room with eight or nine Persian rugs, six first-class Japanese prints, Charles I silver, and a grand piano would be a member of the upper class. One, furthermore, would expect the owner's dinner guests to be of equal stature. It is clear that this is

a novel that deals with a genteel class where Chelsea birds and brocade settees are the order of the day.

Furthermore, Poirot, as always, slips into his role as the perfect Victorian gentleman, carrying on a murder investigation but not breaching proper manners and remaining aloof from it. Poirot not only disapproves of murder, he looks down on it. "It is true I have a thoroughly bourgeois attitude to murder" (383), he says. This line reflects not only Poirot's attitude but also Christie's--being one who disapproved of crime and who built a career which centered on the solving of crime and the conquering of evil. Cards on the Table, once more, moves in that cyclical direction back to order and harmony that existed in the beginning only to be disrupted by an unnatural agent--a murder.

Time in Cards on the Table is more definite than in some of Christie's other novels. As the investigation gets under way, Superintendent Battle in a conversation with Poirot makes specific reference to the year being 1937. Written in 1936, the book still appeals today. The line could have read "in 1927" or "in 1947" with little difference. The fact remains it is early to mid-century.

Finally, a look at The Body in the Library shows how Christie used the setting of St. Mary Meade to bring locale alive in her novels. This novel, a Miss Marple mystery, takes place in the sleepy English village once compared to scum on a pond where everything appears dead. But in

reality, there is plenty going on as the Bantrys discover early one morning when an alarmed maid awakens them with the news that there is a body in the library. Immediately, Christie goes into the business of describing the crime scene and the relationship of the rest of the village to Gossington Hall, the site of the grisly find. In the first chapter, she describes the room:

The library was a room very typical of its owners. It was large and shabby and untidy. It had big sagging armchairs, and pipes and books and estate papers laid out on the big table. There were one or two good old family portraits on the walls, and some bad Victorian water colors, and some would-be funny hunting scenes. There was a big vase of flowers in the corner. The whole room was dim and mellow and casual. It spoke of long occupation and familiar use and of links with tradition. And across the old bearskin hearthrug there was sprawled something new and crude and melodramatic. The flamboyant figure of a girl. . . . (15-16)

After giving readers a picture of the Bantrys' library, she proceeds to describe where Gossington Hall is situated in the village. Whenever she introduces a new locale, she

carefully details its location. For example, in describing where prime suspect Basil Blake lives, she writes:

Basil Blake's cottage . . . was little more than a quarter of a mile from the village proper, being situated on a new building estate that had been brought by the enterprising Mr. Booker just beyond the Blue Boar, with frontage on what had been a particularly unspoiled country lane. Gossington Hall was about a mile farther on along the same road.

(25)

Certainly a map of St. Mary Meade would have accomplished much the same as Christie's geographic descriptions, and she was prone to include diagrams in her work. But there had been several other Miss Marple stories set in St. Mary Meade published before The Body in the Library came out in 1941, so she likely thought readers were familiar with her setting. Naturally that familiarity is an advantage when the same location is used for several stories.

As familiar as the tiny English village is to Christie readers, it still is an isolated setting. One is hardly aware of what is going on in the outside world. The focus of the novel is on the village and the dastardly intrusion of evil. When the action of the novel moves to locations outside of St. Mary Meade, the shift is for the purpose of describing how events at those locations, specifically at

the Majestic Hotel in nearby Danemouth, affected the discovery of the body in the Bantrys' library. Those other locations provide additional clues and are included only because they relate to the crime. The setting is the backdrop for the crime and clues, and it is self-contained.

One does get the sense, only when the action moves to the Majestic Hotel, however, that there is another world out there. There are other people milling around the hotel. But that sense only serves to contrast with the chaos of the crime setting, the natural order of which has been disrupted by evil. Evil, thus, has been contained in the isolated setting until it can be conquered and the natural order of the world restored. When the solution to the case is announced, the isolated setting again becomes a part of the world. The natural order has been restored, and the cycle is complete. The novel has completed its path back to the calm and serene mood of the opening where Mrs. Bantry's dreams of winning first place in a flower show are terminated by early morning tea and the pleasures of a new day in St. Mary Meade.

While everyone in The Body in the Library is not of the upper class, there is a sense of the Victorian manners present that pervades nearly all of Christie's novels. Certainly the epitome of proper manners and style in this novel is Miss Marple, who conducts her investigation and inquiries with subtlety and taste. Always ready to be of

help and comfort to those in need, Miss Marple arrives at the Bantrys and begins her observations that ultimately will lead to the truth. There is indeed a sense of disapproval for those with loose morals, perhaps even more in this novel than in other more modern Christies. Clearly people of questionable moral fiber are the ones more closely linked to the crime. Immediately Basil Blake, a raucous fellow known for his free-spirited lifestyle, is suspected of involvement. And his "loose" women, who incidentally are not residents of St. Mary Meade but outsiders, are suspected, too. Thus, the tiny village setting provides the novel with a mood of virtue to be broken when earthly pleasures manifest themselves in the form of lust and degeneration. Victorian manners are preferred over loose modern ones; and when the evil is removed and the crime solved, the characters take up virtuous lives again, and the village is purged of sin.

Finally, the setting of The Body in the Library provides a slight sense of nostalgia. Published in 1942, the novel makes little reference to time. It was merely contemporary. But read today, there is a feeling that it was set in a time when the world was less complicated and relationships were easier to understand. The novel, no doubt, was modern to Christie, with her references to reckless living; but today it is inordinately tame and provides readers with the pleasure of reflecting on a time when

there were higher standards--or at least the semblance of higher standards--and more attention to appearances by the virtuous.

By examining five novels--Murder on the Orient Express, Death on the Nile, A Caribbean Mystery, Cards on the Table, and The Body in the Library--one can see how setting functions in Agatha Christie mystery novels. She obviously took great pains to construct a setting that would both entertain and intrigue her readers. Whether it be an exotic locale in the Far East or the tropics or a tiny hamlet nestled in the English countryside, the setting always is isolated in order to better serve as a backdrop for a crime and clues. The isolated setting, disrupted by murder and evil, provides a stark contrast to the ordered outside world. The crime setting contains the evil until it can be conquered and discarded, at which time the isolated setting again becomes a part of the outside world. A cyclical pattern is evident in Christie in terms of setting. A calm, serene scene is present in the first few pages, only to be transformed into chaos after the murder, and to have order restored when the final solution is announced. The setting, furthermore, suggests a tone of the story and treats manners in a style reminiscent of Victorian novels. Time in the novels satisfies readers' sense of nostalgia for a period in the past when things were better. A look at five novels--Sleeping Murder, Curtain, Murder at the Vicarage, The Murder of Roger

Ackroyd, and The Mysterious Affair at Styles--will examine character and relationships in Christie's novels and how the characters in her stories further her appeal.

Chapter 4
Characters and Relationships in
Agatha Christie's Novels

When John Cawelti discusses the characteristics of the classical detective story in his study of formula fiction, he points out two artistic skills that all good writers of formula fiction possess to some degree. One is the ability to vary the plot or setting within the story while remaining within the limits of the proven formula. The other is the ability to "give new vitality to stereotypes" or to stretch the characters as far as possible without departing very much from what the audience has come to expect from that character or that type of character. The good writer, Cawelti says, can stretch the characters by showing new facets of their personalities or how they relate to others. The true test of a vitalized stereotype is "the degree to which it becomes an archetype, thereby transcending its particular cultural moment and maintaining an interest for later generations and other cultures" (11). Stereotypes, then, are a vital part of formula fiction, especially the classical detective novel.

There are certain types of characters that must be present for a story to be considered a piece of detective fiction. There must be a victim, a detective who solves the crime, suspects, and others affected by the crime. Because these stereotypes must exist, a writer's originality comes in the variation he uses to develop these characters. It will be the purpose here to examine stereotypes in five Christie novels and how she vitalizes them.

Cawelti continues his discussion of stereotypes by suggesting that there are two ways writers can accomplish stereotype vitalization. One is by allowing the character to embody qualities that appear to contradict his stereotypical traits. For example, Sherlock Holmes is a man of supreme rationality, a scientific investigator who spends hours sorting through clues for the rational conclusions. But at the same time, Holmes is a dreamer, a man who relies heavily on intuition, and a drug taker. These seemingly contradictory qualities stretch Holmes as a stereotypical detective to the limit and complete his character, allowing him to transcend the moment of the story to become an archetype for future generations.

A second way Cawelti suggests adding vitality to stereotypes is to add "touches of human complexity or frailty" to the figure. He warns, however, that this technique is risky because adding too much of the human

element, especially to the detective, could disrupt the formula. Some writers fail in attempts to strike this balance by making characters too complex to be a part of the strict formula of the novel (11-12). Cawelti adds that the act of creating formulaic characters "requires the establishment of some direct bond between us and a superior figure while undercutting or eliminating any aspect of the story that threatens our ability to share enjoyably in the triumphs or narrow escapes of the protagonist" (18-19). In other words, a bond must be established between the reader and a superior figure, likely the detective in a mystery; and the writer must ensure that nothing in the novel prevents the reader from fully enjoying the superior figure's triumphs or narrow escapes. Allowing the reader to share in the delights of the solution of the crime would, then, be a top priority for the mystery writer.

In examining characters and relationships, Cawelti again looks at Poe's definition of classical detective fiction and asserts that there are four vital roles: the victim, the criminal, the detective, and those threatened by the crime (91). One of the more difficult roles to create, Cawelti says, is the victim, because if the reader learns too much about him, he becomes an important character in the story, and the focus turns to the tragedy of his death or misfortune. Thus, the

investigation is weakened, and the formula is disrupted. However, if the reader knows too little about the victim, there is little interest in what happens to him, and the suspense about the outcome of the inquiry is diluted. Poe had two methods of striking a balance between making the reader too emotionally attached to the victim and caring too little about him. Sometimes Poe made his victim "obscure, ordinary, and colorless" and one who meets "a grotesque and mystifying end." As a result, the reader does not feel too much sympathy for the victim; but because his demise was presented in such a terrifying way, the reader's curiosity is piqued and he becomes intrigued and interested in finding out what happened to that character. In the other case, Poe makes the victim considerably important but keeps the victim nearly completely out of the story. In this case, Poe tells the reader only enough about the victim's predicament to give importance to the investigation. In both cases, Cawelti says, Poe keeps the reader from becoming too emotionally attached to the victim but justifies the importance of the investigation. Cawalti adds that it is paradoxical in detective fiction that "the victim, who is supposedly responsible for all the activity, is usually the character of least importance" (92).

Furthermore, creating the criminal is difficult because if the reader becomes too interested in the

criminal's motives or character, the formula again breaks down, and the theme of the novel turns unmanageably complex. Cawelti says that the goal of detective fiction is to establish guilt for a specific crime; if the criminal's guilt is blurred by emotion, guilt is difficult to define, and the goal may be out of reach. It is possible, then, to create an interesting criminal with complex motives, but he "must always be defined as bad" (92).

The creation of the character of Dupin was Poe's most significant contribution to the detective genre because Dupin became the model which crime writers after Poe used to develop their detectives. In "The Murders in the Rue Morgue" and four subsequent stories published between 1841 and 1846, Poe laid down the general principles of the detective story. In an article in H. R. F. Keating's "Whodunit? A Guide to Crime, Suspense and Spy Fiction," Eleanor Sullivan says that Poe, in addition to creating the first detective, Chevalier C. Auguste Dupin, contributed "our first armchair detection, our first locked-room mystery, and our first puzzle story with a code." Furthermore, Poe's stories "employed such precedent-setting devices as false clues left by the villain, ballistics, and the most unlikely solution being the most obvious and correct" (51). Keating says The Great Detective, as conceived by Poe, is a "figure of myth, an archetype," and more than just a thinking machine. Also, "He is capable

of fusing the ratiocinative side of the mind and the intuitive. He deduces, and he also leaps to conclusions which make connections between the apparently unconnectable" (17) according to Keating. Characteristics of the detective, which Doyle also built into Sherlock Holmes, include aristocratic detachment, brilliance, and eccentricity, synthesis of the poet's intuitive insight with the scientist's power of inductive reasoning, and a capacity for psychological analysis (Cawelti 93). Cawelti sums up the detective's role in the story in this way:

He is a brilliant and rather ambiguous figure who appears to have an almost magical power to expose and lay bare the deepest secrets. But he chooses to use these powers not to threaten but to amuse us and to relieve our tensions by exposing the guilt of a character with whom we have the most minimal ties of interest and sympathy. (94)

Because the detective is a detached eccentric, he has no stake in the outcome of the situation in the story. He, thus, uses his powers to prove the guilt of a specific individual rather than exposing some general guilt in which the reader might share. This makes the detective story different from late nineteenth-century, early twentieth-century novels that pronounce guilt on the middle class because it was indifferent and exploited the

lower class and was ultimately responsible for the degeneration of the lower depths of society. The detective, then, may represent a "new nineteenth-century cultural type of intellectual" who instead of projecting guilt on the bourgeoisie laid the blame for specific acts of violence on specific individuals, thus restoring the order of middle-class society (96).

There is a fourth important role in the detective story that Cawelti describes: those characters who are involved in the crime but are incapable of solving it without the detective's help. There are three main types of these characters:

The offshoots of Poe's narrator, the friends or assistants of the detective who frequently chronicle his exploits; the bungling and inefficient members of the official police, descendants of Poe's prefect; and, finally, the collection of false suspects, generally sympathetic but weak people who require the detective's intervention to exonerate them, the manifold progeny of Poe's Adolph Le Bon. (96)

This group of characters represents middle-class society. They are generally respectable, decent people who somehow are drawn into the crime and have no protection against being charged since the police are as likely

to arrest the innocent as the guilty. Cawelti says the suspense of the detective story results from the fact that the crime threatens the middle class, throwing it into chaos. The police, who are supposed to protect the innocent and preserve order, prove to be "inefficient bunglers"; and everyone comes under suspicion. When the detective steps in, he restores order, proving that it was one particular individual and his set of private motives responsible for the crime. This group of characters causes sympathy and fear in the audience, but the fear is alleviated when the detective proves that the guilty party is one individual. According to Cawelti, this explains why the criminal and the victim are usually the least developed characters. "It is not the confrontation of detective and criminal so much as the detective's rescue of the false suspects and the police that constitutes the dramatic nexus of the classical formula" (96).

In terms of narrator, Cawelti maintains that after Doyle turned Poe's anonymous narrator into the "unforgettable Dr. Watson," using an objective narrator who sees partly into the detective's mind became a standard device of detective fiction. The narrator in much detective fiction after Poe and Doyle is often a Watson-like figure who is involved in the story and close to the detective but unable to follow the detective's line of reasoning.

By allowing the narrator to observe the detective but not participate in his perceptions or reasoning process, the writer can divert the reader's attention and prevent the reader from prematurely solving the crime. Because the detective is a man of transcendent intelligence or intuition, who solves crimes by ratiocinative processes, the narrator should not be the detective because the writer would have too much trouble keeping the mystery a secret. In the hard-boiled detective saga, the detective is usually as befuddled about the crime as the readers until the end, so revealing his mental processes by using him as narrator does not jeopardize the mystery. But the classical detective must be on the right track toward the solution from the beginning. Cawelti concludes:

In story after story, when the solution is finally revealed to us, we find that the detective immediately established the right line of investigation by making a correct inference from the conflicting and confusing testimony that had baffled everybody else. Of course if this convention is to be maintained, the writer simply cannot afford to give us any direct insight into the detective's mind. (83)

Cawelti says if the writer decides not to use the Watson-like narrator, he has the option of choosing a

detached and anonymous voice who observes the actions of the detective but does not delve into his thought processes. One final alternative is for the writer to devise a crime that is impossible to be solved by the detective's normal methods or by normal assumptions (83-84).

There are other reasons why detective story writers should give careful attention to the narrative technique, according to Cawelti. If the reader is kept away from the detective's point of view, the "moment of solution" or climax becomes more surprising and dramatic because there is no real indication when it will arrive. If the writer uses a Watson-like narrator--a role Agatha Christie calls the "stooge assistant"--he provides the reader "with an admiring perspective and commentary on the detective's activity." If he uses another type of narrator, he can manipulate the reader's sympathies for a number of suspects without causing the detective to reveal his thoughts. Finally, the reader is encouraged to identify with the "Watson figure" and several suspects rather than the detective because the detective's perceptions are largely hidden (84).

Cawelti finally discusses another form of narrative derived mostly from Wilkie Collins's The Moonstone in which there are several narrators, each of whom moves closer to solving the crime. Cawelti points out that this technique is fairly unpopular because it is difficult to

handle several points of view and coordinate several accounts of the action. As a result, the technique "fragments the process of investigation and the role of the detective" (84).

Agatha Christie, in her autobiography, discusses characterization, especially of her detectives Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple, in her novels. Midway through An Autobiography, begun in 1950 and published in 1977, Christie looks back on her characters with the same critical eye she gave her detectives. After her first twelve novels, Christie realized that she was tied to the detective story and two characters:

Hercule Poirot and his Watson, Captain Hastings. I quite enjoyed Captain Hastings. He was a stereotyped creation, but he and Poirot represented my idea of a detective team. I was still writing in the Sherlock Holmes tradition--eccentric detective, stooge assistant, with a Lestrade-type Scotland Yard detective, Inspector Japp--and I now added a "human foxhound," Inspector Giraud, of the French police. Giraud despises Poirot as being old and passe.

(383)

Christie obviously was well aware of her technique and from whom she borrowed it. It was a proven formula;

and she stuck with it, only later realizing, "I saw what a terrible mistake I had made in starting with Hercule Poirot so old--I ought to have abandoned him after the first three or four books, and begun again with someone much younger" (333).

Of course, it is easy to see Christie's problem with Poirot, who is a retired detective when he enters the scene in The Mysterious Affair at Styles in 1920 and still must be enough alive and coherent to carry on an investigation in Curtain fifty-five years later in 1975. Stuck with him she was, but he became her most popular sleuth; and Christie apparently saw little recourse except to keep Poirot "hanging on." She did, however, write in her autobiography that in Murder on the Links, published in 1923, she decided she wanted a love interest in the book. "I thought I might as well marry off Hastings," she says. "Truth to tell, I think I was getting a little tired of him. I might be stuck with Poirot, but no need to be stuck with Hastings too" (334). It is interesting to note that Murder on the Links hardly spelled the end for Hastings. He continued to surface in novels until the mid-1930s. He was resurrected in Curtain, published in 1975.

Christie was much less bothered by and clearly more fond of Miss Marple, an elderly spinster who debuted in Murder at the Vicarage in 1930. Describing the novel and

its new character, Christie writes in An Autobiography:

Murder at the Vicarage was published in 1930, but I cannot remember where, when or how I wrote it, why I came to write it, or even what suggested to me that I select a new character--Miss Marple--to act as the sleuth in the story. Certainly at the time I had no intention of continuing her for the rest of my life. I did not know she was to become a rival to Hercule Poirot. (522)

Miss Marple certainly did become a rival for Poirot, and Christie had the same problem with age. Described by Christie as an "elderly spinster lady" when she appeared first in Murder at the Vicarage in 1930, she was, like Poirot, in full control of her faculties in 1976 when Christie's final Sleeping Murder, billed as Miss Marple's last novel, was published. Over the forty-six-year span, Miss Marple survived the effects of aging much better than did Poirot. Christie does not dwell on her age in what was called her last case like she does in his. It should be noted that these two novels were written much earlier in Christie's career, but billing them as "last novels" must have involved appropriate editing. Obviously, the idea of creating mature detectives who could solve crimes based on their past experiences appealed to Christie.

Christie goes on to say that Miss Marple may have arisen from the joy she derived from Dr. Sheppard's sister in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. "She had been my favourite character in the book--an acidulated spinster, full of curiosity, knowing everything, hearing everything: the complete detective service in the home" (522). Christie says she liked the idea of village life reflected through the character of Caroline and her brother in Roger Ackroyd, and she liked the part Caroline played in village life. She says:

I think at that moment in St. Mary Meade, though I did not know it, Miss Marple was born, and with her Miss Hartness, Miss Weatherby, and Colonel and Mrs. Bantry (all St. Mary Meade residents)--they were all there lined up below the borderline of consciousness, ready to come to life and step out on to the stage. (524)

Reflecting on Murder at the Vicarage at the writing of her autobiography, Christie says she is far less satisfied with the novel now than at its publication. While she feels the main plot is sound, there are too many subplots and too many characters for the novel to be truly successful. But, she adds:

The village is as real to me as it could be--and indeed there are several villages

remarkably like it even in these days.
Little maids from orphanages, and well-trained servants on their way to higher things have faded away, but the daily women, who have come to succeed them, are just as real and human--though not, I must say, nearly as skilled as their predecessors.
(524)

Miss Marple and the village of St. Mary Meade, consequently, become very real to Christie readers. The novels in which the spinster sleuth solves the crime are as popular as those including the "complete egotist" Belgian detective, as Christie calls Poirot. When she says "they are both stars, and they are both stars in their own right" (522), Christie is on target. They both left their mark on detective fiction.

Continuing her discussion of Miss Marple in her autobiography, Christie confesses that Miss Marple "insinuated herself so quietly in my life that I hardly noticed her arrival." She says she created Miss Marple similar to some of her grandmother's old cronies whom she met in many villages as a girl. Christie says Miss Marple "was not in any way a picture of my grandmother; she was far more fussy and spinsterish than my grandmother ever was" (524). She adds, however, that they were both cheerful people, always expecting the worst of everyone, and

usually right. "I endowed Miss Marple with something of Grannie's power of prophecy. There was no unkindness in Miss Marple, she just did not trust people. Though she expected the worst, she often accepted people kindly in spite of what they were" (525), she says. On the topic of Miss Marple's age--"she was born at the age of sixty-five to seventy" (525)--she says she plainly goofed. Like that of Poirot, the age was a problem, an unfortunate mistake. Christie simply says, "If I had had any second sight, I would have provided myself with a precocious schoolboy as my first detective, then he could have grown old with me" (525).

Christie's candid comments about the problems with her character, especially her detectives, shows that she was intensely aware of the characters in her novels. They came alive for her, and like humans they had their flaws. Christie reacted to them in human terms, feeling a close kindred spirit to Miss Marple and growing to dislike Poirot, and that humanness pervaded her novels. Perhaps that is what Christie readers find so appealing about the novelist. The characters possess a human quality that continues to grow with each edition. The fact that Miss Marple and Poirot were superhuman in not succumbing for years to the effects of aging was overcome by the skill with which she kept them alive. It is her detectives--Miss Marple and Poirot--who gave Christie an edge in her

novels, keeping them alive for nearly three-quarters of a century and high on best-seller lists. Five Christie novels--The Mysterious Affair at Styles, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Curtain, Murder at the Vicarage, and Sleeping Murder--will be examined in terms of characterization in the quest to define her appeal.

The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Christie's first novel, is not exactly typical of her later work. It is more concerned with technicalities than many of her other novels and is much slower getting started and keeping the reader's attention. There is more emphasis on the legal aspects of the case; and the plot becomes so complicated, it is confusing and somewhat difficult to follow. But the novel, published in 1920, did accomplish one very important thing for Christie. It debuted Belgian detective Hercule Poirot, who was to become a model for the detective in the classical mystery novel. Furthermore, it introduced Captain Hastings as narrator and Christie's self-described Watson-like character, and it shows how Christie treats the victim and the criminal.

The first inkling the world gets of Poirot is early in the first chapter when Hastings describes meeting the famous detective some time in the past. Hastings, confessing his secret ambition to become another Sherlock Holmes, says:

I came across a man in Belgium once, a very famous detective, and he quite inflamed me. He was a marvelous little fellow. He used to say that all good detective work was a matter of method. . . . He was a funny little man, a great dandy, but wonderfully clever. (7)

A few pages later, Hastings is reunited with his old friend, Poirot, and following is one of the best descriptions of the detective in all of Christie's works.

Poirot was an extraordinary looking little man. He was hardly more than five feet, four inches, but carried himself with great dignity. His head was exactly the shape of an egg, and he always perched it a little on one side. His moustache was very stiff and military. The neatness of his attire was almost incredible. I believe a speck of dust would have caused him more pain than a bullet wound. Yet this quaint dandyfied little man who, I was sorry to see now limped badly, had been in his time one of the most celebrated members of the Belgian police. As a detective, his flair had been extraordinary, and he had achieved triumphs by unravelling some of the most baffling cases of the day. (16-17)

Certainly one can picture the fastidious little man with the egg-shaped head. Like Sherlock Holmes, he is a celebrated detective with a flair for the extraordinary. But his appearance is a bit more peculiar. He is dignified but odd-looking, stiff, and military-like. Hastings says he is sorry to see Poirot now has a rather pronounced limp. He had been "in his time" one of the best, tackling and solving the most baffling cases. But Hastings was no sorrier than Christie that she portrayed Poirot as a "has been" at the beginning of her career for him.

Throughout the novel, Poirot shines, rifling the most minute details from obscure clues in his diligent, exhaustive search for the missing link in the mystery's chain of events. Poirot's philosophy is put forth clearly in the novel: "one fact leads to another" (30) and "it is always wise to suspect everybody until you can prove logically, and to your own satisfaction, that they are innocent" (102). Even though a number of additional references are made to Poirot's age as the novel progresses, he does emerge with all the characteristics Cawelti says are vital for his role. He is brilliant and ambiguous with seemingly magical powers to expose deep secrets of other characters. He is detached and unquestionably eccentric with no personal interest in the resolution of the case. And he uses his powers to expose the guilt of one individual rather than projecting guilt in general on a class of

people who are ultimately responsible for the crime--and, thereby, vicariously implicating the reader. Poirot, then, is well established in his role in Christie's novels with The Mysterious Affair at Styles. Even if she grew tired of including him and was troubled about the flaw in his longevity, readers obviously overlooked any problems and maintained a lasting fondness for him. He was a success from the beginning.

While Poirot is fairly well developed in The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Hastings is noticeably underdeveloped. Fairly little is known about him except that quoted earlier about his secret desire to be another Sherlock Holmes and some brief references to his career as a soldier and at Lloyd's before the war. Hastings's main function is as narrator in Styles, as he is in several other Christies. It should be noted that he functions perfectly in that role. Hastings is objective, seeing partly into the detective's mind but unable to anticipate his every action or intuit his own major conclusions about the case. He is involved in the story and close to the detective, but he is unable to follow Poirot's complete line of reasoning all the time. He observes the detective but does not participate in his perceptions. He fits the Watsonian role perfectly. Hastings appears in several stories early in Christie's career and then drops out of sight for several years in

the mid-1930s until he is reunited with Poirot in Curtain, published in 1975. It is interesting to consider how the Poirot-Hastings team would have developed had the two always been together in novels. Certainly they could have rivaled the Holmes-Watson duo.

Another Christie character often poorly developed is the victim. Christie seems to be following Poe's second method of developing the victim: she ordinarily presents just enough information about him to justify a thorough investigation after his demise. Generally, it is the method of murder that is the focus of the investigation, thereby distancing it from the victim, himself. The reader usually feels little sympathy for the victim but more curiosity and intrigue over the method of murder used.

In the case of The Mysterious Affair at Styles, the victim, Mrs. Inglethorp, is present from the first chapter. She is described as a "handsome white-haired old lady with a somewhat masterful cast of features" (6), who greets Hastings effusively. Hastings further states, "Her volubility, which I remembered of old, had lost nothing in the intervening years, and she poured out a steady flow of conversation . . ." (6). She appears to be a fairly pleasant old lady. After her initial appearance, Mrs. Inglethorp is present only minimally. She is referred to by others but stays fairly well out of the mainstream of

the plot until her death in chapter three. As in many Christies, the reader finds out much more about the victim after the murder. The investigation in Styles focuses on Mrs. Inglethorp's will and who could benefit from her death. She, consequently, becomes more of a presence in the novel after her death, obviously a calculated Christie move.

The criminal similarly is carefully presented in Christie stories. The reader usually does not become too interested in the criminal's motives or his character, and his guilt is almost never blurred by emotion. He is interesting and complex; but, as Cawelti suggests is vital to the genre, he is always defined as bad.

In The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Christie walks a thin line between developing her guilty parties, Alfred Inglethorp and Evelyn Howard, too much and maintaining the formula. Both are dominant characters in the novel from the beginning. Christie's flaw in the novel is that the plot becomes overly complicated and tiresome, setting up and developing the relationship between Alfred and Evelyn and other characters. Furthermore, the trial bogs the action down. In the end, the reader is overjoyed--and fairly relieved--when Poirot finally makes sense out of the web of tangled details and sorts out the solution to the mystery.

There is fairly little to say about the minor characters in the novel except that they are mere cogs in the wheel of the plot. Inspector Japp of Scotland Yard arrives midway through the story and turns out to be somewhat of a bumbling detective unable to solve the crime without Poirot's help. Incidentally, Japp also reappears in a number of Christie novels over the years. The other characters represent, as Cawelti suggests, middle-class society; and all are fairly equal suspects in the case. They are threatened by the crime and not really protected by the ineffective police. They are saved from the chaos of the crime only when Poirot announces the solution and restores order to the world. These characters in Christie elicit sympathy from the audience, as Cawelti suggests, because they represent the middle class, the average person--like the reader--who can suddenly find himself thrown into a web of intrigue and threatened by misdirected justice.

Styles is not Christie's best novel by any means. In fact, it is not even especially typical of the mature style she would develop later in a fifty-year career. The work is, however, typical of a first novel, where the writer is obviously feeling the way and developing characters and techniques that will give rise to further endeavors. After studying the best of Agatha Christie, a reader could easily identify Styles as her first work

and one she failed in early attempts to get published. The novel, however, introduced her main character and started her on the road to notable detective fiction.

Looking at the novel that introduced Poirot and one that Christie wrote midway through her career but was published and billed as Poirot's last case, one can see how the detective still dominates the action. In Curtain, Poirot is reunited with his colleague, Captain Hastings, at the same house, Styles, in the English countryside. The novel opens with Hastings finishing his journey and renewing old acquaintances. Curiously enough, it is rare that anyone dies of old age in Christie. Christie was interested in unnatural causes of death. Hastings says immediately after the opening that he is amazed to see the (still) "limping figure with the large moustache," Hercule Poirot, "coming up the village street" (2). Hastings further details Poirot's physical condition. He was old in The Mysterious Affair at Styles. In Curtain, "he was now a very old man, and almost crippled with arthritis. He had gone to Egypt in the hopes of improving his health, but had returned, so his letter told me, rather worse than better" (3). Obviously determined to impress readers about Poirot's age, Christie introduces chapter two with further description of the detective, which makes it clear to any reader that Curtain finally will be Poirot's last case.

Nothing is so sad, in my opinion, as the devastation wrought by age.

My poor friend. I have described him many times. Now to convey to you the difference. Crippled with arthritis, he propelled himself about in a wheelchair. His once plump frame had fallen in. His moustache and hair, it is true, were still of jet-black colour, but candidly, though I would not for the world have hurt his feelings by saying so to him, this was a mistake. There comes a moment when hair dye is only too painfully obvious. There had been a time when I had been surprised to learn that the blackness of Poirot's hair came out of a bottle. But now the theatricality was apparent and merely created the impression that he wore a wig and had adorned his upper lip to amuse the children!

Only his eyes were the same as ever, shrewd and twinkling, and now--yes, undoubtedly softened with emotion. (13-14)

Christie, who was eighty-five when Curtain was published, was obviously reflecting on the process of aging. However, while she is careful to document the deterioration of the body, she seems to stress that Poirot's mind is still alert. Poirot, himself, makes the point when

he says: "Me . . . I am a wreck. I am a ruin. I cannot walk. I am crippled and twisted. . . . Mercifully though the outside decays, the core is still sound. . . . The brain, mon cher, is what I mean by the core. My brain, it still functions magnificently" (14-15).

Mental faculties intact, Poirot proceeds to warn Hastings of an impending murder at Styles and then to play games with him over clues. Throughout the novel, Hastings expands his role as the detective's assistant, but Poirot remains the mastermind behind the solving of the crime. Though Poirot's health has deteriorated, he repeatedly emphasizes that his brain still functions well. He still is brilliant, aristocratic, within the limits of his frail health, and exceptionally intuitive and insightful about murder and the criminal mind. He has the power to expose the deepest secrets of others, and in Curtain perhaps more than in other novels, he uses these powers to amuse the reader and himself. By his final case, he has lost none of his eccentricity. However, in this instance, he does have a personal stake in the outcome of the case. Poirot is the killer in Curtain.

This unusual turn of events in the novel, obviously not typical of Christie, changes her usual formula for characterization. While Poirot still remains much the same in his role as detective, the role of the criminal is considerably different. Few readers would include the

master sleuth among the suspects in the novel. Because the plot is fairly complicated and Poirot's poor physical condition is emphasized, attention is drawn away from him as a possible killer. But Christie's motives must be considered in the case. During the explanation at the end when Hastings, after Poirot's death, receives a manuscript written earlier by the detective, Hastings is told that everyone has the capacity to kill. Poirot admonishes Hastings:

Everyone is a potential murderer--in everyone there arises from time to time the wish to kill--though not the will to kill. How often have you felt or heard others say: "She made me so furious I felt I could have killed her!" "I could have killed B. for saying so-and-so!" "I was so angry I could have murdered him!" And all of those statements are literally true. Your mind at such moments is quite clear. You would like to kill so-and-so. But you do not do it. Your will has to assent to your desire. . . . So then we are all potential murderers. And the art of X (the murderer) was this: not to suggest the desire, but to break down the normal decent resistance. . . . It was the marshalling of the forces of a human being to widen a break instead of repairing it. It

called on the best in a man and set it in
alliance with the worst. (254-55)

Clearly Christie is making a philosophical statement about universal guilt. If her Belgian detective, heretofore a paragon of virtue and manners, could succumb to the clutches of evil and kill, then the capacity to murder exists in everyone. The problem here is that when Poirot slips into sin, he falls from the lofty pedestal Christie created for him. He no longer is the model of virtue or intellectual excellence. He degenerates to the ordinary and common, which for the earlier Poirot would have been much worse than death. Poirot in this novel seems to have developed an exaggerated superiority complex. He sees himself as above everything and everyone. He tries to play God. In his explanation, he tells Hastings, "I am the law. . . . By taking Norton's life, I have saved other lives--innocent lives" (279). But then he realizes he is not God. He says, "I prefer to leave myself in the hands of the bon Dieu. May his punishment, or his mercy, be swift!" (279).

Certainly Christie could have been wanting to silence the detective forever, but she could have done that with his death. She did not have to destroy the character she spent so many years building. As a result of her scheme in this novel, most of the conventions Cawelti sets out for the criminal do not apply. The formula breaks down

because the theme becomes unmanageably complex for classical detective fiction. The reader ultimately becomes tied up in the character of the killer, another role that breaks down. The criminal's guilt is blurred by emotion, and the guilt, itself, is difficult to define. Rather than saving the fictional world from the chaos of the crime, Poirot perpetuates it. There is a half-hearted attempt to restore order, via Hastings, at the end of the novel, but it is only moderately successful. Finally, Cawelti says the goal of the mystery writer in terms of the criminal is to create an interesting figure but define him always as bad. Christie does not accomplish this in Curtain.

While the character of Poirot fails in the novel, the character of Hastings is much more fully developed. Curtain is one of his better roles. The reader learns much more about him personally. He shows his strengths and weaknesses--Hastings, too, nearly succumbs to the poisonous potential for murder Christie says lurks within all. But he is seen with a more developed persona. Hastings in Curtain is more than the Watsonian figure as he was conceived. He is intelligent, emotional, and intuitive. He takes on many of the characteristics Christie reserved for her detectives in other novels. Clearly Hastings emerges as the hero in the novel, but he is not a superhuman one. Hastings is a hero with whom

the audience can identify. He leaves the novel fairly unscathed. The final curtain is reserved for Poirot alone.

As a narrator, Hastings functions well as in many other cases. Again, he is involved in the story and close to the detective, but he is unable to follow the detective's mental processes completely. He is probably much more patient than the average person would be when Poirot persists in playing his detection game with Hastings. He certainly is a more than adequate observer of the action in the story, but he does not participate in Poirot's perceptions so he does not reach the solution prematurely. However, he is not detached. Hastings is vital in Curtain and the best choice Christie could have made for the role.

There are three victims in Curtain, and all are major characters in the story. They are ordinary people, but they are not obscure or colorless. Their deaths, however, are mystifying. The reader does feel some emotion about the murders, but the game of detecting "X"'s identity becomes so much the focus of the novel that the victims and other characters slip from the reader's attention. In some ways, Cawelti's model for the victim does not apply because all three are major characters in the novel and some sympathy is elicited by their deaths. Even though Christie breached her formula in Curtain, the novel is a popular one.

The other characters in the novel all follow their roles as middle-class people, equally threatened by the crimes but unable to do much about it. They are plunged into chaos. They are innocent and unprotected when they come under suspicion. They do elicit fear in the audience because the characters, like members of the audience, are ordinary people who find themselves involved in the case through no real fault of their own.

With the variation Christie uses in Curtain, it can be said that she stretches her stereotypes to their limits. In some cases, this practice does not work; in some cases, it does. She fails with Poirot as detective-turned-murderer even if one considers her motives. But Christie was admittedly not a Poirot fan, and here was her last chance to maintain the upper hand of a character who haunted her for so many years. She wanted to abandon him but felt compelled to continue writing him into novels because of his popularity. She does, however, succeed in vitalizing Hastings, her Watsonian character, and her victims. Aside from its flaws, Curtain remains one of Christie's most creative books. One problem with Christie is that her novels are often so similar that it is hard to distinguish among them. But she overcame this criticism when, in Curtain, she imparted to the world Poirot's last case and one her readers would never forget. It was clearly the peak of her technique.

One novel Christie's audience was not so happy to receive was The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. When it debuted in 1926, it caused a great stir among readers who said she did not "play fair" by allowing one character, Dr. Sheppard, to take on two roles--that of narrator and murderer. But she responded by saying she conformed to all the rules of the detective formula, giving her readers adequate clues and opportunity to solve the puzzle. Despite criticism, though, the novel demonstrates another one of her creative approaches to characterization.

Another Hercule Poirot novel, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, opens with the account of a murder told by a discreet country physician, Dr. James Sheppard, in the "peaceful English village of King's Abbot." Christie introduces Poirot at the beginning of chapter three as though he had not appeared before. He is known early in the novel only as Sheppard's mysterious new neighbor who cultivates vegetable marrows. But from the first, this neighbor appears extraordinary. Sheppard relates his first sight of the "strange little man" over the wall in the garden: "There appeared a face. An egg-shaped head, partially covered with suspiciously black hair, two immense mustaches, and a pair of watchful eyes" (26). Later, the previously "ridiculous looking little man" takes on more of the mystique of Christie's popular detective when he is asked to join the investigation into the

murder of Roger Ackroyd. Sheppard describes the little man as "looking at the case from some peculiar angle of his own" (86). After surveying the murder scene where Ackroyd, who is the second victim, is found, Sheppard says of Poirot:

He shook his head, puffed out his chest, and stood blinking at us. He looked ridiculously full of his own importance. It crossed my mind to wonder whether he was really any good as a detective. Had his big reputation been built on a series of lucky chances? (90)

Poirot counters shortly thereafter, explaining his technique of "method, order, and the little gray cells" (91). Christie carefully portrays the detective as "the old Papa Poirot who has much knowledge and much experience" (132). When he assembles all interested parties near the end of the novel, he reveals his personality. He tells the "messieurs et mesdames":

I meant to arrive at the truth. The truth, however, ugly in itself, is always curious and beautiful to the seeker after it. I am much aged, my powers may not be what they were." Here he clearly expected a contradiction. "In all probability this is the last case I shall ever investigate. But Hercule Poirot does not end with a failure.

Messieurs et mesdames, I tell you, I mean to know. And I shall know--in spite of you all. (135)

Throughout the novel, the detective is presented as one who seeks the truth--in spite of all. He is too proud to end in failure. And ironically, he has many last cases. Poirot's character in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is defined substantially through the eyes of the killer, so naturally the perceptions of Dr. Sheppard and the audience would be colored. But the detective surfaces as his usual eccentric, brilliant, intuitive, and aristocratic self with a nearly magical power that enables him to uncover the truth despite adversity. His process of inductive reasoning and capacity for psychological analysis is unsurpassed by any other character. He is definitely detached in the novel with no real stake in the outcome except in terms of his quest for truth. Poirot sees his mission as one of restoring order and exposing guilt, thus protecting the innocent. Christie's portrayal of the detective is clear albeit somewhat indirect compared to novels narrated by Captain Hastings like The Mysterious Affair at Styles and Curtain. The character, however, remains intact despite an adverse narrator.

It was the criminal-narrator character that gave Christie problems in the novel. Because the story is

told from Sheppard's point of view and because he turns out to be the guilty party, the reader mistrusts the narrative technique. In classical detective fiction and other Christies, the narrator is vital to the story in the way he follows the detective's actions but remains baffled by the case until all the clues are in and the solution is announced. In Roger Ackroyd, the narrator knows the murderer's identity from the beginning. His perceptions of Poirot's actions are colored by his own guilt so the audience, in reflecting on the novel at the end, comes to wonder just how much of the puzzle was hidden through the storyteller's words. Sheppard's narration necessarily would have been more objective had he been less involved in the plot and closer to the detective, like the Watsonian figure of Hastings. As a result, the credibility of the narrator and the fairness of the mystery itself are jeopardized. In her study of Agatha Christie, Gwen Robyns says that The Murder of Roger Ackroyd was an overnight sensation, but there were "howls of protests from the purists of detection writing." The headlines read: "She has cheated . . . she has broken the Detection Club rules . . . she hasn't played fair." The Daily Sketch described the book as a "tasteless, unforgivable let-down by a writer who we had grown to admire." Another reviewer proclaimed: "What she did was unethical. It's a damned awful cheat" (56-57). But Christie counters criticism of

the novel in her autobiography when she says:

Of course, a lot of people say that The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is cheating; but if they read it carefully they will see that they are wrong. Such little lapses of time as there have to be are nicely concealed in an ambiguous sentence, and Dr. Sheppard, in writing it down, took great pleasure himself in writing nothing but the truth, though not the whole truth. (410)

It seems the last phrase "but not the whole truth" is the weak spot in her explanation. Readers had come to trust that Christie would not deceive them. After Roger Ackroyd, they were not sure. Christie says that she thought the idea of having the narrator be the murderer in a novel was a good one when it was suggested to her by a friend, Lord Louis Mountbatten; and she considered it for a long time, realizing "it had enormous difficulties" (410). The point is that it breached the formula too much. It was impossible for Christie to write it in "a way that would not be cheating" (410), as she said she wanted to do, or at least appear not to be cheating. The result of her attempt turned the plot into one that was unmanageably complex, and the criminal's guilt was blurred by his narration and was difficult to define. He had complex motives but was not "always defined as bad," as Cawelti asserts is vital to the role.

The final chapter in Roger Ackroyd is a futile attempt by Christie to set things straight and restore order. Sheppard asserts, "I am rather pleased with myself as a writer" (254). But he was not pleased with himself as a murderer. He plans his own death. He says:

When I have finished writing, I shall enclose this whole manuscript in an envelope and address it to Poirot.

And then--what shall it be? Veronal? There would be a kind of justice. Not that I take any responsibility for Mrs. Ferrars's death. It was the direct consequence of her own actions. I feel no pity for her.

I have no pity for myself either. (255)

The role of the criminal fails with that of the narrator. The two are separate and impossible to merge successfully. In the end, rather than having a resolution of truth and order, the character falls apart and plans suicide. The bonds of trust in the narrator and the author, herself, are broken.

Other characters, the victims and those who represent middle-class society, fared much better in the novel. The victims, first Mrs. Ferrars, then Roger Ackroyd, were minor characters. She has just died when the novel opens, and he is murdered at the end of the fourth chapter. So, there is very little time to develop the victims as

characters in the novel. This method is good, according to Cawelti, who says that the reader should not know too much about the victim because the reader will become too emotionally attached to the victim whose death will become a tragedy overshadowing the story. There is no chance of that happening with Mrs. Ferrars and very little with Ackroyd. As in many Christies, the reader finds out most about the victims after their deaths. They are developed solely for the purpose of justifying the investigation. These characters as stereotypic victims are adequate.

The rest of the characters are typical middle-class society, all threatened by the case. Some shine, like Sheppard's loving older sister, Caroline, who has "a ferret-like curiosity and the staying power of a bloodhound" (7) and one whom Christie, herself, favored. But most are innocent victims of the chaos. They find themselves involved and unprotected by an inadequate police force. And many become possible suspects for the reader. Nevertheless, the characters are ordinary people with whom the audience can identify. The housekeeper, the widow, the handsome rake, the lovely English lass, the big game hunter, the efficient secretary, the nervous butler, and the ladylike parlormaid are perfect stereotypes and add conformity and stability to the experimental technique Christie attempted. The novel is better because of them.

So, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd is both a radical attempt to vitalize her stereotypes and a demonstration in portraying the classic victim, suspects, and detective. It was not a complete failure for Christie despite the failed attempt to merge the narrator-criminal roles into one character. If one measure of a writer's appeal is reader response, then Roger Ackroyd was a success because Christie's name recognition and popularity were much higher as a result of the book. Robyns says Roger Ackroyd not only caused a "furor in detection circles around the world" but also shot Christie to the top of her profession. "Whatever the ethics of The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, it received enough publicity to move Agatha Christie right to the forefront of detection writers," Robyns says. Christie became the "undisputed Queen of Crime" (53-58). If a writer's success is related to whether the reading public remembers a particular edition, Christie, again, emerged victorious. It is one of those novels mystery readers do not forget. It is indelibly marked "Agatha Christie."

Interspersed among the thirty-six Poirot novels were thirteen novels featuring Miss Jane Marple, a curious and very perceptive elderly lady and Christie's admitted favorite. Not recalling exactly how Miss Marple slipped into her consciousness, Christie debuted the spinster sleuth in 1930 in The Murder at the Vicarage. While the

novel is definitely not one of her best, it does introduce the world to Miss Marple and create the setting of St. Mary Meade to which Christie will return a number of times. In the ensuing years, Miss Marple developed quite a following and emerged as a female model for the detective in mystery novels. She is a notable creation who came to rival Hercule Poirot among Christie readers. And she fared far better than Poirot under Christie's pen.

The first word used to describe Miss Marple is terrible. In a conversation near the opening of Murder at the Vicarage, Griselda, the vicar's wife, calls her "the worst cat in the village" and one who "always knows every single thing that happens--and draws the worst inferences from it" (4). Statements like these are typical early descriptions of Miss Marple in the novel. Contrary to the lengthy paragraphs Christie writes to detail Hercule Poirot, Miss Marple's character is described usually in brief phrases by other characters. For instance, there is one phrase explaining what she looks like: "Miss Marple is a white-haired old lady with a gentle appealing manner" (10). Shortly afterward, she is called a "wizened-up old maid" who thinks she "knows everything there is to know." The narrator, the vicar, adds, "though doubtless Miss Marple knew next to nothing of life with a capital L, she knew practically everything that went on in St. Mary

Meade" (64). Later the vicar says, "Miss Marple is not the type of elderly lady who makes mistakes. She has got an uncanny knack of being always right" (86). Christie seems to be imparting details about her detective in the same way she reveals clues to her mysteries--one at a time. Curiously enough, considering Murder at the Vicarage is Miss Marple's first case, her presence is noticeably lacking. She frequently stays in the background during much of the investigation, carried on in large part by the vicar and others in the novel. But near the end of the story, she becomes more visible just in time to put all the clues together and offer the solution. Either Christie was unsure about the direction the new character would take, or she chose a different technique of keeping Miss Marple at a minimum in this particular case. It is interesting to note that in subsequent Miss Marple novels, she is much more visible and carries out more of the investigation. Near the end of Murder at the Vicarage, though, Christie, perhaps realizing her deficiency, includes a fairly long paragraph in which Miss Marple reveals her character and explains her methods. Christie writes:

"You see," she began at last, "living alone as I do, in a rather out of the way part of the world, one has to have a hobby. There is, of course, woolwork, and Guides, and

Welfare, and sketching, but my hobby is--
and always has been--Human Nature. So
varied--and so very fascinating. And, of
course, in a small village, with nothing to
distract one, one has such ample opportunity
for becoming what I might call proficient in
one's study. . . ." (194-95)

Certainly, Christie had to substantiate Miss Marple's expertise in the field of detection with more than aside comments from other characters. Obviously she realized this and included the passage above designed to show Miss Marple as some sort of expert on human nature or at least one who has made a lifelong study of people. The explanation is fairly adequate but somewhat weakened because it is spoken by Miss Marple, herself. If the narrator or someone else had given a more detailed description of her, she would have had stronger credibility in the novel.

Regardless of the fairly sparse description, the reader comes away from the novel with a good deal of respect and admiration for Miss Marple. This feeling of respect, somewhat intuitive and pleasantly subtle, may be what draws readers--and drew Christie, herself--to Miss Marple. There is a closeness the reader develops for her, drastically different from the respect and fondness one has for Poirot. Both are likable characters, stars in their own right, but Miss Marple is much more personable

and human. Like Poirot, she is aristocratic and genteel; but with Miss Marple the qualities soften, and the bond between the reader and the detective takes on a feminine tone. While Poirot is always "the detective," Miss Marple is more like the reader's favorite aunt who just happens to have a knack for solving mysteries--exactly the impression Christie wished to leave.

Those softer, more human qualities, however, do not diminish Miss Marple's role as a sleuth. She fits Cawelti's description of what the detective should be. She is brilliant, though not conceited. She blends the poet's intuition with the scientist's power of inductive reasoning. She excels in her capacity for psychological analysis. It is always Miss Marple who solves the crime, like Poirot, unaided by others. And while she is not especially eccentric, she does have her peculiarities, mostly stemming from the fact that she is a true English gentlewoman reared in Victorian England. She appears to have a somewhat magical quality to expose others' deepest secrets; and in the end she proves the guilt of a specific individual, thereby restoring order to the world of the novel and saving the innocent from the chaos of crime.

One final example shows Miss Marple's true personality. After the crime has been solved and the explanation given, Miss Marple acknowledges that she knows why the vicar's wife has been reading a book on Mother Lore.

"My love to dear Griselda--and tell her--that any little secret is quite safe with me," she says, referring to Griselda's pregnancy. "Really Miss Marple is rather a dear. . . ." (230).

Unfortunately, even "dear" Miss Marple cannot salvage Murder at the Vicarage. It is an immensely complicated story with numerous subplots intertwining amidst a mass of detail only Miss Marple could hope to unravel. Christie herself even admitted this is an overly complicated novel, and not one of her more successful ones (524). Nevertheless, there is a fairly typical victim, a slightly typical criminal, and a host of other characters who are good representatives of the middle class.

The victim, Colonel Protheroe, is introduced in the first chapter as an especially unpleasant man "who enjoys making a fuss on every conceivable occasion" (3). Even on the first page of the novel, the vicar remarks "that anyone who murdered Colonel Protheroe would be doing the world at large a service" (1). The Colonel is very troublesome and somehow manages to alienate his family and others in the village to the point where the general sentiment is that "a world without Colonel Protheroe in it would be improved for the better" (22). Again, Christie uses brief statements from other characters to leave negative impressions about the victim. He is never physically present in the novel until he is found shot in the head

in the vicar's study. Christie's technique of keeping the victim off stage allows the reader to remain detached from him and ensures there will be little or no sympathy at his demise. Certainly creating a character as abusive as Protheroe helped, too, since few would be affected by the death of such an unpleasant man. The reader, too, knows relatively little about him, except his negative qualities imparted through others. The investigation does focus on the motive for the murder, but the intrigue of this case lies in the grotesque and terrible death the man meets in an unusual place--a vicarage. The reader does find out more about him as the investigation continues, but the focus is shifted away from the victim and onto his mystifying murder. Protheroe, then, is fairly typical of the stereotypical victim, according to Cawelti's definition.

The criminal, on the other hand, is literally another story. Protheroe was killed by his wife, Anne, "a desperate woman, the kind of woman who would stick at nothing, once her emotions were aroused." Furthermore, Anne was "desperately, wildly, madly in love with Lawrence Redding" (22). It is the familiar story of the wife wanting to kill her husband so she will be free to have her lover. Unfortunately, this novel is not nearly so simple. Christie weaves a complicated web of details that carries the plot through false suspects and confessions, mistaken identities, inconsistent time, sleeping sickness, and

another attempted murder before Miss Marple succeeds in the nearly impossible task of finding the solution. Murder at the Vicarage is too tedious for even the most diligent Christie reader because of its unmanageable plot. The criminal in this case is an interesting character and ultimately defined as bad, but her guilt is somewhat blurred by the sympathy the reader feels for her. Anne Protheroe is clearly an abused woman who desperately seeks a more pleasant life with her lover. She is a major character in the story and certainly one with whom many readers would sympathize. The result, then, is that her guilt is not clearly defined, and the role fails. She is not a good example of what the criminal should be. Christie attempts to save the role by having Anne and her conspirator, Lawrence Redding, brought to trial in the final chapter. But she abandons the attempt, saying the case is a "matter of public knowledge. I do not propose to go into it" (226). She merely explains that the criminals were brought to justice, but it is not a clear-cut case, and she does not handle their guilt very well. The role of the criminal ultimately fails in Murder at the Vicarage.

A minor character who is introduced in the novel and appears a number of times throughout Christie's career is Inspector Slack, a member of the Much Benham police force. Slack makes the two-mile excursion to St. Mary Meade in a

handful of Christie novels when crime invades the peaceful village. One brief paragraph in Murder at the Vicarage describes Slack. The narrator says upon Slack's arrival:

All that I can say of Inspector Slack is that never did a man more determinedly strive to contradict his name. He was a dark man, restless and energetic in manner, with black eyes that snapped ceaselessly. His manner was rude and overbearing in the extreme. (35)

Despite his attempts to "contradict his name," Slack is fairly ineffective in solving crimes. He goes through the motions of detective work--examining the murder scene and questioning suspects--but he never manages to put all of the clues together coherently enough to find the solution to the puzzle. Slack is the stereotypical inspector bumbling about being "abominably and most unnecessarily rude" (38) and never really getting anywhere. He obviously satisfies the need for an official member of the police at the crime scene but shows that Christie's confidence was in others when it came to solving murders. The police never solve the cases on their own.

The other characters in the novel are fairly typically middle-class characters. Many of them come under suspicion at one time or another, even the narrator-vicar. They, too, are threatened by the crime and elicit fear in the audience. The audience identifies with the characters

because they are not protected by the police and are as likely as not to be falsely accused. They are thrown into the chaos caused by the crime. Their function is to provide Christie with a fine selection of suspects. They are adequate stereotypes.

The narrator of the story, the vicar, represents another approach Christie takes to that role. Speaking in the first person a good portion of the time, he tells the story as though he were recalling it sometime later in the future. He presents a good objective account of the events of the case and, in fact, takes over some of the functions of the detective in questioning suspects and accumulating and enumerating clues. The vicar does not function as the stereotypical detective's assistant, as did Hastings in The Mysterious Affair at Styles and Curtain. The vicar, although not especially close to the detective, observes her actions but is unable to share in her ratiocinative processes. The main reason for that is because Miss Marple remains absent from a good part of the story and works independently in carrying out her probe. The vicar's principal function is to relate the facts. He is involved in the story, and at one point suspicion is subtly cast on him. In addition, he has his own ideas and theories about who the suspects are and what motives may predominate. He is about as objective a narrator as he can be and still remain successful in diverting attention

away from the detective yet allowing the investigation to proceed and the reader to gain clues. Consequently, the climax is dramatic because the narrator is as baffled by the case as everyone else, and the solution comes as a surprise. It is fair to say that the role of the narrator in the novel is carefully executed. It was one of the things Christie did right in the book.

Robert Barnard, in his critical study of Agatha Christie, complains that Murder at the Vicarage "is one of those stories where the most likely suspect is proved conclusively at the beginning to have been unable to commit the murder and proved conclusively at the end to have done so" (48). Barnard says the plan in the novel depends on collusion but also Miss Marple's being in her garden at just the right time and noticing when she sees Mrs. Protheroe that the woman has no place on her where a weapon could be concealed. Furthermore, there are other circumstances that may be likelihoods but "cannot in the nature of things be certainties." Barnard asserts that the reader will rebel because "nobody in their senses would plan a murder in that way." He adds:

Murder in real-life may often be puzzling by chance, by a lucky (or unlucky, depending on viewpoint) falling out of things, but murders in detective stories are always deeply laid plans, and the idea of anyone concocting a

plan with so many imponderables and incalculations makes the reader dig in his heels and say "Ridiculous!" (48)

Murder at the Vicarage, admittedly a flawed novel, did introduce the world to Miss Marple, who was to become the second popular Agatha Christie detective. Barnard is correct when he complains that Christie left too much in the plot to chance, and the novel does have too many imponderables, but it is noteworthy. Christie also used a different approach to narration, which worked well. In this novel, she adheres to the accepted criteria for the role of victim, but the formula breaks down with the role of the criminal. Murder at the Vicarage must be considered a success, but it is not one that sticks in the reader's memory. The story of who shot Colonel Protheroe in the vicar's study somehow manages to merge into the vague mass of Christie plots. One could pick it up a second time and simply not recall an earlier acquaintance.

Sleeping Murder, on the other hand, is much better written and demonstrates more skill at characterization. Another Miss Marple novel, Sleeping Murder was published in 1976 after Christie's death. Unlike Murder at the Vicarage, Miss Marple is far more visible in Sleeping Murder. When she is introduced in chapter three, she is described by her nephew, Raymond West, as "a perfect

period piece--Victorian to the core" (27). Later the reader is told that Miss Marple is "an attractive old lady, tall and thin, with pink cheeks and blue eyes, and a gentle, rather fussy manner. Her blue eyes often had a twinkle in them" (28). As in Murder at the Vicarage, most of the information readers gather about Miss Marple's character comes in snippets of conversations, brief descriptions by other characters, or her own words, again somewhat like the clues to her mysteries. Later in the novel when Miss Marple, Giles, and Gwenda Reed consider the facts of a possible crime committed many years earlier, Miss Marple confesses that she considers herself one with a "sadly distrustful nature." She adds, "I make it a rule to take nothing that is told me as true, unless it is checked" (252-53). Several pages later the "celebrated lady" reiterates, saying, "It really is very dangerous to believe people. I never have for years" (291). But regardless of the fact that there is considerably less description of her in the novel, her presence is felt throughout. Giles and Gwenda carry out most of the investigation into the mysterious death of Gwenda's step-mother nearly twenty years ago. It is, however, left up to Miss Marple to interpret the evidence they gather and expose a murder. It is fairly common for Miss Marple to approach a case in this way--letting others do much of what is often called the detective's "leg work"

and returning to the action frequently to draw inferences, to make speculations, and finally to reach the solution.

Regardless of the fact that Miss Marple operates differently from Poirot, she is no less successful as a detective than he is. In Sleeping Murder, she again emerges as aristocratic, subtly brilliant, and intuitive. She maintains a friendly detachment but does not leave other characters or the reader thinking she does not care about the situation. From her years of studying people, she has gained a scientist's power of inductive reasoning and has a notable capacity for psychological analysis. In other words, she fits Cawelti's characteristics for the role of the detective in classical detective fiction. Miss Marple is a somewhat ambiguous figure, owing to the fact that her character is not vividly described. But the mystique of Miss Marple surely was intention, designed to emphasize her status and afford her the respect she has deserved from years of solving baffling cases. Miss Marple uses her powers to expose hidden secrets and guilt. She, in the end, restores order to the novel. Perhaps the only characteristic Miss Marple does not really possess that is generally found in the classical detective is that of being eccentric. She is not, but she is a genteel Victorian lady with Victorian morals and manners but very little naivete. Miss Marple is about as professional as she could be and still be considered an amateur. Says

Inspector Primer, "She's a very celebrated lady. . . . Got the Chief Constable of at least three counties in her pocket" (272). Miss Marple is a gifted detective.

Another character in the novel who fits Cawelti's description perfectly is not even alive during the time frame of the novel. Helen Kennedy, the victim, was killed some eighteen years earlier by her brother. It is impossible in this case for Christie to overdevelop the character of the victim to the point where the audience would feel too much sympathy for her. She exists only in the past. Actually, the audience never finds out very much about her except that she was Gwenda's stepmother and, before strangely disappearing many years ago, lived in the same home Giles and Gwenda are now occupying. The focus on the novel is not on the murder of Helen but rather more on a murder that has gone undetected for nearly twenty years. It is the victim's strange and terrifying disappearance that justifies the investigation although early in the novel Miss Marple warns, "I'd let sleeping murder lie--that's what I'd do" (53).

The other victim in the story, Lily Kimble, who was a parlormaid in the house when Helen and Gwenda's father lived there, reads an ad in the paper for information about Helen Kennedy and is murdered on her way to see Dr. Kennedy, Helen's once-devoted brother. Lily was not

going to get involved, but she suspects that money might have something to do with the ad, so she arranges the meeting that leads to her death. The audience feels some sympathy for Lily because she is portrayed as a naive working-class woman married to something of a brute of a man. She is gossipy and curious but seemingly harmless. But her presence in the novel is fairly limited, so her character is not well developed, and her death is not really mourned. Again, it is the mysterious circumstances surrounding the incident that justifies the investigation. Christie describes her death in an especially mystifying fashion:

Lily Kimble took the footpath and walked briskly uphill. The path skirted the side of a wood; on the other side the hill rose steeply, covered with heather and gorse.

Someone stepped out from the trees and Lily Kimble jumped.

"My, you did give me a start," she exclaimed. "I wasn't expecting to meet you here."

"Gave you a surprise, did I? I've got another surprise for you."

It was very lonely in among the trees. There was no one to hear a cry or a struggle. Actually there was no cry and the struggle was over very soon. (238)

The mystery now becomes who killed Helen Kennedy and Lily Kimble. This passage adds significant suspense to the story, which suffers from lack of it because of the remoteness of the first crime. Kennedy now complains, "What could have become of the woman?" He wonders if she may have lost her way despite the fact that he gave her explicit directions. "Perhaps she's changed her mind?" he says to Giles. Or maybe she missed the train. "He walked up and down the room" and even called the station to inquire whether a "middle-aged country woman" had been on the four thirty-five and asked for directions to his house (238-39). After the second murder--and more than one murder is especially common in Christie's books--suspense is increased, and the reader's interest is rejuvenated. The fear of danger is increased for other characters, demonstrating Christie's ability to vitalize a "sleeping" plot and somewhat nondescript characters. The mystery now is more horrifying after an additional murder and the threat immediate.

The criminal in the story, Dr. James Kennedy, is one of Christie's most notable murderers. He hardly comes under suspicion at all until the very end and after Lily's death. He is a fairly strong character in the novel--one who is helpful to Gwenda and Giles in their investigation and one who appears genuinely interested in finding out what happened to his sister, whom he has not heard from

in years. It is curious, however, that he never bothers to become interested in finding out what happened to her before Gwenda and Giles arrived in Dillmouth. That certainly is a clue. When the couple meets Kennedy, he is described as a "gray-haired elderly man with shrewd eyes under tufted brows. His gaze went sharply from one to the other of them" (75). Kennedy is "stiff and unbending" but polite. He seems smart, but not smart enough to refrain from answering Giles and Gwenda's newspaper ad for information about Helen Kennedy. Obviously Kennedy's curiosity, like Lily's, brought his downfall. He is a major character in the novel, but even though his presence is not limited, he is mysterious. While his motives may not come under suspicion immediately, the audience does wonder about him. When his guilt is discovered, it is not difficult to define. He is an interesting criminal with complex motives, and his guilt is not blurred by emotion. The audience has little feeling for him. One cannot say that he is always defined as bad, but he is definitely not defined especially as good in the story. Kennedy fits his role as well as any of Christie's stereotypical criminals. He is one who adds mystery and suspense and vitalizes Sleeping Murder.

The other characters in the story adequately represent the middle class threatened by the crime. The suspects are Captain Richard Erskine, who once had an affair

with Helen on board a ship; Walter Fane, who is now a lawyer but who also was once in love with Helen; and J. J. Afflick, an ostentatious businessman who, again, was once one of Helen's lovers. They are minor characters who could turn out to be the murderer. They are involved in the crime and fairly weak people who must depend on the detective's intervention to exonerate them. This group of false suspects has been plunged into chaos by the awakening of a sleeping murder and are all as likely as not to be charged with murder because their innocence is unprotected by an inefficient police force. These false suspects do elicit some sympathy from the reader but not a great deal. They and other minor characters are merely cogs in the wheel of the plot, but they do adequately serve their function.

Inspect Last and Inspector Primer arrive after the Lily Kimble murder. They represent two more of Christie's bumbling detectives, rather uninterested in the case. After Gwenda meets them, she is less anxious about the crimes. "But you will find out, won't you?" she asks. Inspector Primer responds:

"We shall ask all the questions necessary, Mrs. Reed, you may be sure of that. All in good time. There's no good in rushing things. You've got to see your way ahead."

Gwenda had a sudden vision of patience
and quite unsensational work, unhurried,
remorseless. . . . (271)

The inspectors, inefficient as they are, are seen to care little about the case and have no feeling for its victims. They, of course, are unable to make much progress, and it is left up to Miss Marple to discover the solution. Last and Premier, a curious selection of names, are typical Christie police stereotypes who represent a tongue-in-cheek characterization and add nothing to the solution of the mystery.

The narrator in Sleeping Murder represents another Christie modification in that role. This time, instead of using the detective assistant, one of the characters, or the criminal, himself, she uses an anonymous narrator who tells the story and observes the action. Because he is not a character, he cannot follow the detective's progress and offer speculations of his own. But he is an adequate and unbiased observer of the action. One learns little from him except the facts of the case. This point of view prevents the reader from prematurely solving the crime because the narrator does not participate in the detective's perceptions. Furthermore, the climax of the novel is not jeopardized because it does not arrive prematurely. It retains its dramatic effect. Christie often uses other characters to tell the story, so in using an objective,

anonymous narrator in Sleeping Murder she was offering more variation on her technique.

Finally, it is easy to see how important characterization was to Christie. She spent time considering her characters and trying to develop them to fit her formula for detective fiction. But she also tried to stretch them to their limits, vitalizing them as stereotypes. Christie's experimentation with characterization is noteworthy. She fails in some instances, but in many cases she is a resounding success. Her criminals and victims usually are successfully cast. Her bumbling inspectors are always what she intended. Her minor characters in most cases adequately represent the threatened middle class thrown into the chaos of the crime. It is with her narrator that she shows the greatest amount of flexibility and experimentation. But her greatest contribution to detective fiction is the development of her two popular sleuths--Hercule Poirot and Miss Jane Marple. For them, Christie will long be remembered. A look at theme in five Christie novels--Hallowe'en Party, The ABC Murders, Sleeping Murder, Curtain, and The Murder of Roger Ackroyd--will continue the quest to define Christie's appeal.

Chapter 5

Theme in Agatha Christie's Novels

John Cawelti, as well as most scholars of mystery fiction, agrees that the fundamental principle of the mystery is the investigation and solution of a crime. The discovery of hidden secrets usually yields some benefit for the characters. The problem in the mystery always has a rational solution. This search for hidden secrets is primarily an "intellectual, reasoning activity," and it has been suggested by some critics that readers' fascination with the mystery can be traced to the desire for rational solutions. Cawelti says:

The actual narrative of a mystery involves the isolation of clues, the making of deductions from these clues, and the attempt to place the various clues in their rational place in a complete scheme of cause and effect. Such an activity, and the underlying moral fantasy that all problems have a clear and rational solution, is necessarily of greatest interest to those individuals whose background and training have predisposed them to give special interest and valuation to the processes of thought. (43)

It is true, then, that because the mystery always presents a problem with a rational, intellectual conclusion, it appeals to those who prefer to believe that there is a rational order to the universe. The mystery is always--albeit sometimes quite complex--a complete scheme of cause and effect. There is an order that predominates over chaos. If one considers the crime scene in relation to the outside world, it is clear that the crime setting represents disorder. It is isolated when chaos reigns and before the crime is solved; but when the detective exposes hidden secrets, order is restored, and chaos is defeated.

In addition to the theme of order versus chaos, the mystery also emblemizes what Cawelti calls the relation of surface reality versus the hidden depths of guilt. The idea of hidden guilt was a common theme of the Gothic literature of the nineteenth century. Examples are found in the works of Mary Shelley, Bram Stoker, and Henry James. And when Edgar Allan Poe developed his detective stories, he incorporated that theme. To explain how the idea of hidden guilt emerged in literature, Cawelti cites the decline of the force of the church and nobility and the rise of the middle class to social dominance. Threatening the middle class was the emergency of lower classes and a rising concern with psychological and sexual urges. The lower-class reform movement of the nineteenth

century left the middle class feeling guilty for the miseries of the poor. And, while middle-class values emphasized the repression of aggressive and sexual drives, there was a growing interest in psychological investigation. The result of these paradoxes was a tension between confidence and guilt, and the crime literature of Europe and America in the nineteenth century and twentieth century reflects this tension (97-103).

Cawelti says the "classical detective story offered a temporary release from doubt." First, it affirmed the validity of an existing social order and the belief that crime was a "matter of individual motivations." Secondly, it transformed crime, a serious moral and social problem, to an entertaining pastime by reducing it to a solvable puzzle or game with "a highly formalized set of literary conventions." Finally, the mystery allowed readers to vicariously entertain powerful feelings brought on by repression of guilt or implication. Cawelti suggests that these factors are largely responsible for the popularity of detective fiction in the middle class (105).

One final broad theme must be mentioned as common to the mystery genre, and that is the triumph of good over evil. Agatha Christie, in her autobiography, says that when she began writing detective stories, she started thinking seriously about crime literature. She had her purpose in mind. Christie says:

The detective story was the story of the chase; it was also very much a story with a moral; in fact it was the old Everyman Morality Tale, the hunting down of Evil and the triumph of Good. At that time, the time of the 1914 war, the doer of evil was not a hero: the enemy was wicked, the hero was good; it was as crude and as simple as that. We had not then begun to wallow in psychology. I was, like everyone else who wrote books or read them, against the criminal and for the innocent victim. (527)

Christie was concerned that good always triumph over evil. She wanted her heroes to represent the good, and she wanted her criminals to always be seen as evil. She was on the side of the innocent victim and against the criminal because he is bringing evil into the ordered, moral world. She goes on to say that she never dreamed of a time when "crime books would be read for their love of violence, the taking of sadistic pleasure in brutality for its own sake." Rather, the passion behind detective stories is to help save innocence "because it is innocence that matters, not guilt" (527-28). Christie was conscious of wickedness, and she continually fought to portray evil as an intrusion upon a moral, ordered world.

By looking at five Christie novels--The ABC Murders, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Hallowe'en Party, Curtain,

and Sleeping Murder--one can identify the dominant themes in Christie's fiction. These novels were chosen because they span a significant portion of Christie's career and are representative of the Christie canon. Primarily the themes will be the triumph of good over evil, ratiocination as the way to truth, appearance versus reality or surface reality versus inner depths of guilt, and order versus chaos.

One Christie novel that clearly embodies these themes is The ABC Murders. As has been shown, in this case, a mysterious madman sends a series of notes to detective Hercule Poirot announcing an impending murder. Poirot painstakingly searches for and finds a number of clues that points to one suspect who finally is apprehended. Early in the novel, officials suspect that the first letter warning of a crime is a hoax perpetrated by a drunkard. Poirot, however, prefers to take the warning seriously. Scotland Yard notes the 21st--the designated day of the murder--when it arrives, and checks the community of Andover, where the crime was supposed to take place. "It was a hoax all right," Chief Inspector Japp says. "Nothing doing. One broken shop window--kid throwing stones--and a couple of drunks and disorderlies. So just for once our Belgian friend was barking up the wrong tree" (263). That, of course, was before the first body was found. Because a murder is supposed

to have taken place but none has been discovered, the theme of appearance versus reality is established early in the novel.

The theme emerges again later in the story when Dr. Thompson discusses Alexander Bonaparte Cust's medical condition. "He's playing the sane man remarkably well. He's an epileptic, of course," Thompson says (356). The doctor continues to explain that he thinks Cust "knew perfectly well he committed the murders." The letters "show premeditation and a careful planning of the crime" (356). Thus Cust is not the madman detectives thought. He is a ruthless, wicked killer. His inner guilt is exposed when Poirot relates Cust's background: how he received a slight head injury during the war and was discharged from the army for epilepsy. Poirot tells Hastings:

We know that he invented and carried out an intensely clever scheme of systemized murder. We know he made certain incredibly stupid blunders. We know that he killed without pity and quite ruthlessly. We know, too, that he was kindly enough not to let blame rest on any other person for the crimes he committed. If he wanted to kill unmolested--how easy to let other persons suffer for his crimes. Do you

not see, Hastings, that the man is a mass of contradictions? Stupid and cunning, ruthless and magnanimous--and that there must be some dominating factor that reconciles his two natures. (358)

Cust is evil and wicked. His inner guilt ultimately is exposed to reveal a cold-blooded murderer. Cust represents the intrusion of evil upon the ordered world. Poirot explains the intrusion of evil and chaos on the ordered universe when he tells Hastings:

Always, up to now, it has fallen our lot to work from the inside. It has been the history of the victim that was important. The important points have been: 'Who benefited by the death? What opportunities had those round him to commit the crime? It has always been the 'crime intime.' Here, for the first time in our association, it is cold-blooded, impersonal murder, murder from the outside. (305)

Cust brings the evil and chaos into the world. Poirot represents the hero who will banish the evil and restore order. When the evil is present, it isolates the chaotic crime scene; but when the solution is found, the solution restores order and ends the chaos. Poirot, as representative of the good, triumphs over the evil

represented by the criminal. And it is Poirot's ratiocination that leads to the truth. As always, Poirot focuses on finding the solution to the crime in a rational way. He weighs the clues until they fit together. "Patience. Everything arranges itself, given time," he tells Hastings (360). When Poirot offers the solution, he also explains how his mind works. He says:

In a well-balanced, reasoning mind there is no such thing as an intuition--an inspired guess! You can guess, of course--and a guess is either right or wrong. If it is right you call it an intuition. If it is wrong you usually do not speak of it again. But what is often called an intuition is really an impression based on logical deductions or experience. (366)

While Poirot explains his methodology better in other novels, this passage does show that he is a man who believes in the intellectual processes as the way to truth. "Logical deductions or experience" is the best way to approach the solution of a murder. And, the system of logical deductions implies there is some ultimate order in the world. Poirot uncovers the guilt, exposes inner secrets by collecting clues and formulating a logical conclusion, and restores order to the world of the novel. The typical Christie themes of good's triumph over evil, appearance versus reality, order versus chaos, and

rationation as the way to truth operate satisfactorily in The ABC Murders. The themes operating in The ABC Murders also work in another Christie novel, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. Perhaps more than some others, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd expertly demonstrates the theme of appearance versus reality. It is the predominant idea of the novel and one that brought Christie great criticism. This novel, as we have seen, is the one in which the narrator turns out to be the murderer. After the entire novel leads readers to think that Dr. James Sheppard is sincerely interested in exposing the guilty party, the narrative takes an unexpected turn, and it is revealed that Sheppard himself is the guilty one. Things are definitely not what they appear to be in this book. Sheppard is an example of what in formal literature is known as an unreliable narrator, or one who is deceptive. A reliable narrator, according to Wayne Booth in The Rhetoric of Fiction, is one who "speaks for or acts in accordance with the norms of the work." An unreliable narrator does not. Booth says, "deliberately deceptive narrators have been a major resource of some modern novelists" and are often "a matter of what (Henry) James calls inconstancy; the narrator is mistaken, or he believes himself to have qualities which the author denies him." Unreliable narrators are troublesome to deal with and make strong demands on "the reader's

powers of inference" because what they say cannot be taken as a reliable clue to the circumstances. If the narrator is discovered to be untrustworthy, "the total effect of the work he relays to us is transformed" (158-59).

In The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Sheppard is presented as a physician--one who is called upon to save lives--when in actuality, he turns out to be a murderer. He appears rather friendly to Hercule Poirot when he meets Poirot one morning in the garden as "the man who grew vegetable marrows." But, Poirot is his enemy. He suspects Poirot of being a retired hairdresser; and finally, one-third into the novel, he learns Poirot's true identity as a retired private detective. Sheppard tries to keep up his charade of being a friend to Poirot and sincerely interested in finding a solution to the crime when, in fact, he certainly is not. There is one subtle indication that Sheppard is not what he appears to be. After Roger Ackroyd is found murdered, Flora Ackroyd suggests to Sheppard that they go at once to Poirot. "He will find out the truth," she says. Sheppard responds, "My dear Flora . . . are you quite sure it is the truth we want?" (75).

This passage further demonstrates the theme of ratiocination as the way to truth. Poirot is representative of the process of ratiocination. When Poirot enters the case, he explains how he operates. "Everything is simple,

if you arrange the facts methodically," he says (85). A few pages later, Poirot adds, "That, too, is my watchword. Method, order, and the little gray cells. . . . The little gray cells of the brain" (91). Other references are made throughout the novel to Poirot's style. Finally, Sheppard becomes aware that Poirot is powerful, and it is through him that truth will be found. His fear of Poirot has been justified. "He and I lunched together at an hotel. I know now that the whole thing lay unravelled before him. He had got the last thread he needed to lead him to the truth," Sheppard says (191). The powers of the little gray cells are strong, and through Poirot's intellectual reasoning, truth is found.

At the end of the novel, Sheppard confesses and attempts to explain and justify his actions. With this, order is restored. Additionally, in the novel, good triumphs over evil. Sheppard, as murderer, is the evil in the story. Once he is exposed, he confesses and plans his own suicide. Evil must be conquered in some way, either with the criminal being brought to justice or through his death. In this case, Christie chooses the latter. Certainly allowing the criminal to be exterminated by another character would have introduced further evil into the story. By allowing him to take his own life--and while that action is not completed in the novel, there is no reason to think it will not be--

the book ends on a moralistic note. It must be the "good" in Sheppard that precipitates his confession and attempts to set matters straight.

When Sheppard opens his "Apologia" chapter, he says he is very tired from his task of writing all night. "A strange end to my manuscript. I meant it to be published some day as the history of one of Poirot's failures! Odd, how things pan out," he says (253). Actually, the novel had to end this way. In keeping true to her themes, Christie had to have good win out over evil, order be restored to chaos, inner guilt be exposed, and through the process of intellectual reasoning truth found.

Another novel that focuses on the appearance versus reality theme is Hallowe'en Party. In this novel, a young girl, Joyce Reynolds, is found drowned in a bucket to be used to bob for apples at a halloween party for a group of girls eleven years old and older. Prior to Joyce's death, she had boasted that she once witnessed a murder. Joyce is known for greatly embellishing the truth, so the mystery first focuses on whether Joyce actually saw a murder or whether she made up the story to impress her friends. If she did, in fact, see someone killed, then was she, herself, killed to be silenced, and who committed the second awful deed? The appearance versus reality theme is introduced early in the novel when mystery writer Ariadne Oliver observes a room full

of people. "They're nice people, I should think, on the whole, but who knows? she says to herself (4).

Mrs. Oliver later describes the reaction of others to Joyce's claim that she witnessed a murder. She says:

That afternoon when we were fixing things up. It was after they'd talked about my writing murder stories and Joyce said, "I saw a murder once," and her mother or somebody said, "Don't be silly, Joyce, saying things like that," and one of the older girls said, "You're just making it up," and Joyce said, "I did. I saw it, I tell you. I did. I saw someone do a murder," but no one believed her. They just laughed and she got very angry. (20)

Obviously the reader does not know whom to believe. There is a distinct contradiction between what Joyce claims to be and what she appears to be, and most readers are puzzled or confused. Joyce herself is a mystery.

Finally, Poirot comments to Mrs. Oliver at the search of the crime site for clues: "A very unsuitable place for a murder. . . . No atmosphere, no haunting sense of tragedy, no character worth murdering. . ." (41). Woodleigh Common, a small village about thirty or forty miles from London, was clearly not the kind of community where

murders occur everyday. And, Apple Trees seemed a fashionable and agreeable house, the perfect setting for a children's party. One would hardly expect a murder to occur at a gathering for girls eleven and older. All the way through the novel, reality turns out to be in sharp contrast to what one would expect.

The one thing readers can count on, however, as in all Christie novels, is Hercule Poirot's dedication to finding truth. The theme of ratiocination as the way to truth is evident. Poirot states it outright when he says, "For me, it is truth I want. Always truth" (154). And the way Poirot undertakes his quest for the truth is always the same, through ratiocination, though Christie, in this case, tries to update her language with modern analogies. In a conversation between Mrs. Oliver and Poirot, she likens his approach to crime solving to a computer.

"Do you know what you sound like?" said Mrs. Oliver. "A computer. You know. You're programming yourself. That's what they call it isn't it? I mean you're feeding all these things into yourself all day and then you're going to see what comes out."

"It is certainly an idea you have there," said Poirot, with some interest. "Yes, yes, I play the part of the computer. One feeds in the information--" (34-35)

Hallowe'en Party was published in 1969, so the idea of referring to computers obviously would have been a novel one to Christie. Certainly using computers as an analogy for Poirot's intellectual approach to crime solving was clever. It, however, was not totally original. A Canadian journalist, Jacques Futrelle, who incidentally lost his life at thirty-six in the 1912 sinking of the Titanic, created a character named Professor Augustus S. F. X. Van Dusen, known as "The Thinking Machine." Van Dusen appeared in several detective short stories and a novel in the Sherlock Holmes tradition published early in the twentieth century (Catalogue of Crime 195, 500-501). The scientific process of feeding in and synthesizing information in order to find a solution is both like a computer and like Poirot's method. Both lead to truth, demonstrating the theme of ratiocination as the way to truth.

Of course in this case, as in other Poirot novels, Poirot uncovers hidden secrets that expose guilt and lead to the solution. Frequently, Hallowe'en Party without exception, there are mistaken identities, and exposing these secrets reveals the key clues to the mystery. Of course the crime turns the fictional world into chaos, and when Poirot unravels the mystery, he restores order to the world. In addition to restoring order, Poirot symbolizes it. He is the epitome of order as well as the means to restore it.

Closely tied to the idea of surface reality versus inner depths of guilt are two other themes that should be explored in Hallowe'en Party. One is the idea that the present has its roots in the past. This idea means that whatever happens in the present is a direct result of the past, i.e., the present cannot escape the past. As Poirot conducts his investigation, he questions Elisabeth Whittaker, a local schoolteacher, about some old students. Miss Whittaker responds as best she can remember, then asserts, "All this is past history." Poirot immediately replies, "Old sins have long shadows. . . . As we advance through life, we learn the truth of that saying" (70). Later when discussing the case with Mrs. Oliver, Poirot explains: "But to everything that happens there has to be a past. A past is by now incorporated in today, but which existed yesterday or last month or last year. The present is nearly always rooted in the past" (377). Frequently Christie uses this theme paired with her appearance versus reality theme. It is nearly always some hidden secret that is the clue to the mystery, and usually it is her detective who exposes this hidden guilt. In a good many Christies, the present is nearly always rooted in the past.

A second theme tied in with appearance versus reality in this novel is the idea of "born criminal" or the "beast in man." In a conversation between Poirot and Rowena

Drake, who runs the charities in Woodleigh Common and set up the ill-fated party, she recalls an old proverb: "The fate of every man have we bound about his neck." Poirot explains the proverb by saying that the maxim is an Islamic saying. He adds:

One must accept facts, . . . and a fact that is expressed by modern biologists--Western biologists-- . . . seems to suggest very strongly that the root of a person's actions lies in his genetic make-up. That a murderer of twenty-four was a murderer in potential at two or three or four years old. Or of course a mathematician or a musical genius. (112)

As the conversation turns to motive, Mrs. Drake asks, "You mean committed by someone mentally disturbed to the extent of enjoying killing someone? Presumably killing someone young and immature?" To this, Poirot responds, "One does hear of such cases. What is the original cause of them is difficult to find out. Even psychiatrists do not agree" (113).

This passage is interesting because it suggests an idea attributed to nineteenth-century Italian criminologist Cesare Lombroso, who published a work in 1887 in which he claimed that criminals were a "biological subspecies" of an earlier stage in man's evolution and that the criminal inherited his criminal tendencies from his

ancestors who had undergone the degenerative process (Pizer 57). While there is no evidence to suggest that Christie was familiar with Lombroso's theory of "born criminal," it was a popular belief and evident in late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century naturalistic literature. The above-cited passage does suggest that Christie was clearly interested in what motivates criminals, as do similar passages in many other of her novels. She likely read about the psychology of the criminal mind, as is suggested by Poirot's comments that one's actions lie in his genetic makeup and that psychiatrists disagree on criminal motivation. Certainly the popular interest in psychology at the time she started writing may have caused Christie to concentrate on motivation and may have brought to mind the possibility of an atavistic flaw in one man's heredity as well as hidden secrets and guilt as the root of his actions.

The novel that brings the final curtain down on Hercule Poirot as a symbol of order and ratiocination as the way to truth is Curtain. In Poirot's final case, Christie breaks many of her long-established rules concerning the Belgian detective. He no longer is representative of good in its triumph over evil. Since Poirot turns out to be a murderer in this novel, he cannot, through his ratiocination, reach truth and

conquer the chaos that crime has brought into the world even though he tries. While the themes break down where Poirot is concerned, Hastings picks up somewhat on the ratiocination. He finds the truth through intellectual processes, even though many of the clues and conclusions are supplied by Poirot and discovered by Hastings after the detective's death. In a sense then, order is restored, and evil is conquered because the audience and Hastings learn the truth, but it is not the same process that exists in other Christie novels.

The one theme, however, that does hold up is appearance versus reality. Curtain is the perfect example of things not turning out to be what they appear to be. Near the end of the book, John Franklin, a physician, says a "curious thing" about Poirot. "Got a very great respect for human life, hasn't he." Hastings replies, "Yes--I suppose he has. How often had I not heard Poirot say: 'I do not approve of murder'" (208). Later Poirot confesses in a manuscript that he was not the man everyone thought he was. He says:

Yes, my friend, it is odd--and laughable--and terrible! I who do not approve of murder--I, who value human life--have ended my career by committing murder. Perhaps it is because I have been too self-righteous, too conscious of rectitude--that this terrible

dilemma had to come to me. For you see, Hastings, there was two sides to it. It is my work to save the innocent--to prevent murder--and this--this is the only way I can do it! Make no mistake. X could not be touched by the law. He was safe. By no ingenuity that I could think of could he be defeated any other way. (256)

Even though Poirot tries to justify his actions in his confession, saying he saw no other way to stop "X," he, himself, has fallen into the clutches of evil. Poirot adds that the reason Hastings did not arrive at the truth is because he has too trusting a nature. "You believe what is said to you. You believe what I said to you" (266). This is further evidence of Poirot's secret nature and hidden guilt. He tells Hastings he "was not helpless at all. I could walk--with a limp" (266). Poirot is not the crippled old man devastated by age that Hastings had thought.

The theme of appearance versus reality is further demonstrated when Poirot explains his theory to Hastings that "everyone is a potential murderer--in everyone there arises from time to time the wish to kill" (254). Even those who so strongly protest murder--even Poirot--have the capacity and latent desire to kill. Christie, through Poirot, seems to be saying that people are rarely what

they appear to be and that there is universal guilt in the world. When the flaws in surface reality are exposed, one can see inner guilt and move closer to the truth.

In the final chapter, in the manuscript to Hastings, Poirot reveals all the secrets and exposes the hidden natures of other characters. For example, he says, "Norton, the gentle nature-loving man, was a secret sadist" (258). Poirot defines the relationships between the characters and why they were at Styles. And finally he tries to justify his own actions. "By taking Norton's life, I have saved other lives," he says. "But still I do not know. . . . It is perhaps right that I should not know. I have always been so sure--too sure. . ." (279). When the final curtain falls on Poirot, he is not the confident, aristocratic detective he has always appeared to be. Rather, this time, in his final case, he is very humble. He says:

But now I am very humble and I say like a little child: "I do not know. . . ."

Good-bye, cher ami, I have moved the amyl nitrite ampoules away from beside my bed. I prefer to leave myself in the hands of the bon Dieu. May his punishment, or his mercy, be swift? (279)

Certainly in Curtain this is Poirot's hidden nature and in this novel the truth. Cawelti has said that if

the characterization breaks down in the novel, the theme can become unmanageably complex. Without question, the character of Poirot breaks down. The result is a confusing series of rationalizations. The themes become cloudy and questionable. And, finally, the novel leaves the readers cold, less than satisfied, and without the sense that order has been fully restored and that good has completely triumphed over evil.

Sleeping Murder, Miss Marple's final case, is far more successful than Curtain in terms of theme. Again, it is the theme of appearance versus reality that is the strongest. In this novel, a young couple, Giles and Gwenda Reed, move into their first home, only to find that the house is strangely familiar to Gwenda. She feels that she has lived there before. As it turns out, she did live there briefly as a child after her father married her stepmother. The other odd thing is her feeling that she witnessed a murder in the home and the victim was a woman named Helen. After considerable investigation and admonitions from Miss Marple to "let sleeping murder lie" (53), it is discovered that the victim was Helen Kennedy, Gwenda's stepmother, who was killed by her brother, James, a local physician. Once again, the appearance versus reality theme is rooted in hidden guilt and secrets of the past. The Reeds uncover many details in their quest for the truth.

It is significant that the typical Christie "English village" setting supports the past/present theme because there are few changes in small villages and people from the past are still around. As various characters turn out to be linked in the past, the one character who is exactly the opposite of what he seems to be is Dr. Kennedy.

When Kennedy responds to the Reeds's advertisement for news about Helen Spenlove Kennedy, he says he lost touch with her many years ago and would be glad to hear some news. He appears to be sincerely interested in finding out about his long-lost sister. He is somewhat helpful to the Reeds in their initial inquiry. But rather than being a good person, he turns out to be evil. Kennedy killed his sister, then set her husband up to think he was guilty of murdering his wife. The charade drove Gwenda's father to the sanitarium, where he died insane. To the community, Helen merely "disappeared"--presumably running off with another man. Again, as in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Christie lets her murderer double as a physician. Supposedly one who saves life rather than destroys it, a doctor-murderer is the kind of crafty juxtaposition Christie uses to enhance her appearance versus reality theme. One would hardly expect the "good doctor" to be the wicked killer.

Other characters, too, have hidden natures. Lily Kimble, who worked in the Kennedy household, also responds to the ad for news about Helen Kennedy. She appears to be helpful, but really she responds to the ad because she wonders if there is money in it for her. Additionally, she is rather nosy. Her greed and curiosity end up costing her her life when she sets out for an appointment with Dr. Kennedy and is murdered.

Kelvin Halliday, Gwenda's father, also is not what he thinks he is. He fears he has killed his wife, when in actuality he was drugged by the doctor and suffered from hallucinations. He goes insane and is seen as a pathetic man.

The house of Hillside, too, is not the pleasant old-fashioned dwelling Gwenda thinks it is when she buys it. It turns out to have a secret nature all its own, with steps buried by gardens, doors walled in, and closets painted shut. The house, especially the winding staircase from which Gwenda viewed the murder as a child, takes on a definite personality, much like buildings did in the late nineteenth-century popular romantic tradition. Hillside has a haunting atmosphere and the capacity to drive Gwenda nearly crazy. Gwenda says she felt more at home everyday until she realized that she instinctively knew too much about the house. She tells Miss Marple:

You see . . . I'm mad! I imagine things!
I go about seeing things that aren't there.
First it was only wallpaper--but now it's dead
bodies. So I'm getting worse. . . .

Or else it's the house. The house is
haunted--or bewitched or something. . . .
I see things that have happened there--or
else I see things that are going to happen
there--and that would be worse. Perhaps a
woman called Helen is going to be murdered
there. . . . Only I don't see if it's the
house that's haunted why I should see these
awful things when I am away from it. So
I think really that it must be me that's
going queer. And I'd better go and see a
psychiatrist at once--this morning. (35-56)

By making the building a character in the novel,
Christie could further her theme of appearance versus
reality. Certainly the house is not haunted and should
not be able to drive Gwenda to think she is insane, but
it does. She bought it because it looked pleasant and
comfortable and she had vague pleasant memories of it in
her subconscious. But she came to fear it and what it
represented. The house becomes a symbol of something
wicked and evil that Giles and Gwenda sought to conquer.

In the end after much probing and speculation, the Reeds discover that truth. Even though Miss Marple advises them at first to "let well enough alone" (49) because her intuition tells her the past could be dangerous, they persist. The desire to know the truth is as strong to them as it is to Poirot in any of his cases. And Giles and Gwenda follow the method of ratiocination as the way to get to the truth. They systematically approach their mystery, weighing evidence and clues and interviewing everyone they can find. In the end, with Miss Marple's help, they sort out the details to uncover an eighteen-year-old murder, another recent killing, and a criminal on the loose. It is the process of ratiocination that brings them truth, the methodology Christie always uses.

Finally, by discovering the truth and uncovering hidden secrets and guilt, order is restored and good triumphs over evil. Even though the wrong is eighteen years old, it still must be righted. Through the Reeds and Miss Marple, a murder has been exposed and put to rest. The disorder that arose after the couple began their investigation has been quelled. The house becomes a friendly and pleasant place for them once again. Gwenda tells Giles:

Poor Helen . . . poor lovely Helen . . .
who died young. . . . You know, Giles,
she isn't there any more--in the house--

in the hall. . . . I could feel that
yesterday before we left. . . . There's
just the house. And the house is fond of
us. We can go back if we like. . . . (296)

This passage shows that order has been restored and evil has been conquered. Giles and Gwenda have avenged Helen's death and righted a wrong that existed for nearly two decades. The sleeping murder is no longer a nightmare for Gwenda.

In addition to presenting puzzles of detection with tantalizing clues, Christie writes her mysteries with definite themes. Five novels--The ABC Murders, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, Hallowe'en Party, Curtain, and Sleeping Murder--show these themes in Christie's detective fiction. Frequently there is the theme of appearance versus reality or surface reality versus inner depths of guilt. Characters are not always what they seem, and the past holds the key to the present. When hidden secrets lurking in a character's background are exposed, the detective is on his way to unraveling the mystery. Furthermore, it is through the process of ratiocination that the truth is found. The detective and others in the novels conduct careful investigations and assimilate clues to the puzzle. It is, then, the intellectual processes that come into play to reveal the conclusions. It is the work of the "little gray cells" that offers the truth and the solution

to the mystery. When the truth is discovered, order is restored to a world thrown into chaos by crime. Usually it is the detective who is responsible for restoring this order since he is the one who discovers the truth. And, in the end, evil is avenged, and good triumphs. Even when a murder has been hidden for years, as in Sleeping Murder, the wrong finally is righted. Good reigns in the end in Christie.

Chapter 6

Conclusion

In defining the appeal of Agatha Christie, the mystery is established as escapist/entertainment literature and as formula fiction. Then Christie is validated as a pop/mystery writer using her autobiography and comments from critics. Attention then is turned to the novels, themselves, to show how structure, setting and time, characters and relationships, and theme fit the models for formula fiction and how they function in Christie's overall appeal. Twelve novels were used as representative of the Christie collection. They are The Mysterious Affair at Styles, The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, The Murder at the Vicarage, Murder on the Orient Express, The ABC Murders, Cards on the Table, Death on the Nile, The Body in the Library, A Caribbean Mystery, Hallowe'en Party, Sleeping Murder, and Curtain.

One looks to Edgar Allan Poe's detective stories of the 1840s as an early form of literary escapism and a model for detective fiction. Other older forms of popular literature included the Gothic novels and medieval romances, but Poe has been recognized as contributing

significantly to the development of the detective story. As Poe and other writers experimented with the genre, a number of conventions evolved that formed a basic structure for the mystery. The structure established bonds between the writer and the audience, giving the reader a definite form to count on and intensifying his enjoyment. Furthermore, the structure put the genre into the category of a puzzle for writers as well, who attempted to inject as much originality and variation as possible without fundamentally changing the formula. As a result, the mystery evolved into a popular genre with definite elements.

At the root of the appeal of the mystery is its relation to man's basic psychological needs for excitement and security. Man needs excitement to escape the boredom of everyday life and security to cope with an unpredictable world. Man is miserable if he has no danger and excitement in his routine life. According to John Cawelti, formula fiction allows the reader to share in the excitement of love and death without disrupting his basic sense of security and order. Furthermore, the excitement and uncertainty in the fiction are controlled and limited (16).

The novels of Agatha Christie represent a kind of literary escapism. Her novels follow a specific pattern that offers the reader danger and excitement in a

controlled and limited way. Christie follows a definite set of rules; the pattern of the puzzle is always the same. And it is her attempts at varying situations and conflicts that bring the audience back for more. Sometimes Christie's experiments are successful; sometimes they are not. But she does write with a concentration on originality by adding variety to the formula, which must be recognized as part of her appeal.

The fundamental principle of Christie's work, as with many mystery writers, is the solution of a crime through investigation and the discovery of hidden secrets. The solution is always a rational one and involves making deductions from clues in order to identify a complete scheme of cause and effect. The belief that all problems have a rational solution causes the mystery to appeal to those who take a rational, intellectual, and reasoning approach to the real world. Some mysteries, especially those set in the 1930s, 1940s, and 1950s, appeal to a popular sense of nostalgia in which the familiar world of the past consoles the unfamiliar world of the present and the terrifying world of the future.

Crime in literature has appealed to audiences since Homer's Iliad. The Greeks and Romans, as well as Shakespeare, used it as an entertainment device as did the writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Finally, film and television brought crime into the contemporary living room in the twentieth century. So crime and violence as entertainment in the mystery have had a long tradition.

One reason crime is universally entertaining is because it appeals to man's basic aggressive nature, and the mystery is a way for him to fantasize about crime. When the authority of the church began to break down in the nineteenth century, scientific rationalism became the dominant value. No longer was the "ideal" steeped in religious beliefs at the core of the middle-class individual. Church and law became separate, and man began to be more interested in the form of the crime and how it was solved than whether or how the criminal would be punished. There was a "romanticizing" of crime, and man began to enjoy the details of crime aesthetically. Various types of the detective spring up by the 1920s, among them the hard-boiled detective and the English gentleman/sleuth (Cawelti 52-75).

Working from Sherlock Holmes as a model, Christie defined her formula as she began writing in the 1920s. She wanted her criminal to be someone predictable but who would not appear to be obvious for some time (Autobiography 300-301). The plot must focus on rationality. She was conscious, too, of developing technical skills,

i.e., writing the correct length to sell well (Auto-biography 401). The detective story to Christie was the story of the chase. It was a story with a moral--the triumph of good over evil. She was always sympathetic with the innocent victim and against the criminal. The force behind the detective story is the attempt to save innocence because innocence is what matters, not guilt. She had a strong conviction that innocence should be protected and evil should be punished (Autobiography 527-29).

Christie's appeal can be traced in part to her ingenuity. While the structure in each novel is nearly identical, her work reflects a complexity that allows her to balance the detective-mystification structure. She blends character and atmosphere to complement the formula.

Her surprise endings have been cited by critics as contributing to her appeal. She steers clear of violence, preferring rather to focus on character and situation. Her murder mysteries are like games of chess or crossword puzzles--no more perilous. And regardless of setting, the technique remains the same. There is a desire to maintain decorum in her novels--to be reasonably proper and decent. She appeals to a strong sense of nostalgia in her readers, which continues to thrive today. Her intimate knowledge of people and relationships allows her to fill her books

with the subtle nuances of aristocratic life (Robyns 4-17).

Turning to the patterns of formula mystery defined by Cawelti, one finds six components necessary for a story to be considered a piece of classical detective writing. They are introduction of the detective; crime and clues; investigation; announcement of solution; explanation of solution; and denouement. The situation must be standard, beginning with an unsolved crime and moving toward a solution. The story may focus on determining the identity and motive of the criminal or on his method and evidence of the crime. Usually there is a detective present who has little interest in the crime but in a detached way manages to solve the mystery. The crime must be a major one with complex ramifications, but the victim must not be mourned. The detachment of the detective and the reader is vital to the story because it simplifies the situation. Characters are not complex, and the crime is an intrusion of evil in their lives that can be alleviated when the mystery is solved (Cawelti 83-91).

Christie follows Cawelti's formula for detective fiction fairly closely. She always begins with an unsolved crime and moves toward the solution of the mystery, constantly focusing on the identity of the criminal and concentrating on the method and evidence of the crime. There is always a detective present in her novels who has little

personal interest but in a detached way solves the crime. The crime usually is a murder with significant ramifications, and there is little mourning for the victim and/or victims. Her characters are not particularly well-developed, and the crime is an intrusion of evil upon their lives.

Christie varies the introduction of her novels, sometimes opening with a death, as in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, and sometimes opening with a group of strangers about to embark on an adventure or preparing for a pleasant evening together--Murder on the Orient Express and Cards on the Table, respectively. Sometimes the detective appears on the first page, as in The ABC Murders; and sometimes his appearance is delayed until well into the novel, as in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd. Occasionally, it is the setting that receives the most attention in the opening, as in Murder on the Orient Express and Murder at the Vicarage. The ways in which Christie varies the opening of her novels indicate that she considered the first few pages very important in grabbing reader attention. Frequently the opening sets the tone of the entire novel, and the sense of suspense that is set forth in the first pages carries well into the investigation.

As important as the opening of the story is to Christie, equally important are the crime and clues. The crime always is a significant one surrounded by tangible clues

but appearing to be insoluble. In most Christies, the murder occurs within the first forty pages, so the bulk of the novel focuses on the investigation. She usually does not color her description of the murder victim with vivid details that she likely would have found offensive or that may offend the sensibilities of her readers. Following her description of the crime, she continues with an intricate tangle of clues that appears to lead the reader to the solution but eventually take him deeper into the web of confusion. Her novels usually have complicated plots that sprawl into seemingly unrelated directions until the detective ties them together at the end. Many characters usually come under suspicion; and as the action in the novels evolves, so do the intricacies of the relationships. She frequently reiterates the details of the crime; and, through the questioning of suspects, she embellishes old clues and adds new ones. The detectives are usually superhuman and the only ones who can tie together the loose ends of the case. The reader, furthermore, is never allowed to share in the thought processes of the detectives. Christie plays fair with her readers, always giving them the clues--albeit obscure--to solve the mystery.

Christie sometimes uses diagrams to aid the reader in following the investigation. Usually the diagram is a map of the town or design of the murder site, i.e.,

the location of various cabins on a ship or train or furniture in a room. She oftentimes focuses an entire chapter on one character in her parade of suspects. In the cases where she does not have a parade of suspects, as in The ABC Murders, Christie maintains her strict organization, keeping the novel moving along a definite pattern with suspense building as the investigation intensifies. The investigative sections in Christie's novels show the most creativity and development.

Christie dispenses with the last three conventions of detective fictions in fairly short order. The announcement of solution segment usually is anticlimactic because the real interest of the story is on the development and explanation of the puzzle. After the detective summons the suspects and all the evidence is presented, the criminal usually confesses. Frequently the confession and detective's solution occur at the same time followed by a brief explanation and a quick denouement. Once the reader knows who and why, there is little left to say. Sometimes Christie stretches the investigative section with false finishes. It is not uncommon for an innocent character to confess to the crime. The identification of the criminal is the climax or turning point in the novel because from then on the reader sees the situation from the detective's point of view.

The explanation of the solution is a high point in the novel because it represents the goal to which the story has been moving. Christie fans savor the elegant speeches of Poirot and the quiet reasoning of Miss Marple as the web of confusion is untangled and the final pieces are placed in the puzzle. More important than the announcement of who committed the crime is the explanation of how and why the crime was committed and which clues led to its solution. Most Poirot novels contain a carefully written explanation. There is frequently a gathering of suspects and all interested parties and then an address by the detective in which the facts of the case are reiterated and motives and opportunity reviewed. Suspects are eliminated, and the murderer is confronted. An admission usually ensues. The confession by the real killer usually comes within a very few pages of the end of the novel. In Miss Marple novels, there may not be a formal gathering of suspects, but most interested parties are on hand at the end. Miss Marple simply explains her solution in a decidedly less pretentious tone than Poirot. Rather than confronting the murderer and intimidating him into a confession, she simply states who the guilty party is and why. A confession does not necessarily follow. When the explanation has been given, there is little more to say, and a quick close follows. Sometimes Christie includes a surprise ending, as in The Murder of Roger

Ackroyd, but it usually is written in an efficient way so as not to bog the reader down with tiresome details.

Not all Christies have a formal denouement. When they do, they are usually very brief, obviously due to the reader's waning interest. The lack of a real denouement in some of her novels indicates that Christie attached little importance to a formal conclusion. She was more inclined to end the story after the case is solved. Furthermore, it is more dramatic for the detective to present the explanation and then take his leave, ending the mystery on a high note. The mystery has been solved, and all of the pieces have been fit into the puzzle. The tone is a positive one. The reader is satisfied, perhaps even exhilarated, that the solution has been given and explained. The goal of the novel has been reached. In the cases where a denouement is present, as in The ABC Murders and The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, it is usually very simple and is not concerned with the punishment of the criminal. Christie's best novels end immediately after the explanation while the emotion still is intense and reader satisfaction is at a peak.

Proper setting is another important element in the detective story. Cawelti says it must provide a backdrop for the crime and clues, removing the story from the outside world and allowing the writer and reader to concentrate only on the mystery. The setting also offers

rich sketches of local color. It can set the tone of the novel and oftentimes provides an air of verisimilitude reminiscent of the Victorian era (Cawelti 97-98).

Christie attached a great deal of importance to setting, taking pains to create exotic locales, as in Death on the Nile or A Caribbean Mystery, or placing her story in a quiet little hamlet in the English countryside, as in The Body in the Library. Regardless of where the story is set, it is an isolated place with little contact with the world outside of the crime setting. The setting in Christie's novels functions as a limited backdrop for the clues and suspects, and the reader's attention is never focused on the outside world or on social injustice but always on the mystery at hand. The stories usually move in a cyclical pattern from the peace and normalcy of life in the opening pages to the crime and investigation and back to the ordered world when the detective announces the solution and explanation. The crime scene provides a stark contrast to the ordered outside world. Christie's novels, furthermore, satisfy a sense of nostalgia for the genteel, proper world of the Victorian era. Even in the stories set in exotic locales, the characters maintain an air of verisimilitude and decorum reminiscent of the mid-nineteenth century. Like other modern writers, Christie longed for a time in the past when things were better--less chaotic and more ordered. But she realized that

chaos and evil exist in the world. In her novels, evil is always present but always controlled and contained in an isolated setting. The evil, too, is always conquered by the detective, and order is restored at the end of the novel when the isolated setting again becomes a part of the universe. Setting in Christie's novels functions as a character, as in Murder on the Orient Express, holding the clues to the mystery; and she often includes diagrams to help readers visualize the scene. Whether the novel is set in an exotic locale or in the tiny English village of St. Mary Meade, the setting is as vital to the story as the characters.

Time is fairly unimportant in Christie's novels, except that it is always twentieth century and usually early to mid-century. She always wrote in contemporary time, so the novels of the 1930s reflect a lifestyle of the 1930s. Novels written later, in the 1940s or 1950s, for instance, reflect those times but contain a definite sense of nostalgia for the past.

In addition to a unique setting, detective novels have stereotypical characters who fall into four main roles: the victim, the criminal, the detective, and those threatened by the crime. Cawelti notes generalizations about each category. The victim must be created carefully so that the reader has just the right amount of feeling for him. If he is a dominant character, the reader will

feel the tragedy of his death, and the focus of the story will be turned away from the investigation. If too little is known, the reader has no real interest in finding out why, how, or by whom he was killed. The criminal, also, is difficult to create because if the reader becomes too interested in his motives, the formula breaks down. The criminal's guilt must be easy to define and not blurred by emotion. In other words, the criminal must always be defined as bad. The detective must be brilliant and ambiguous and must appear to have some magical power to expose the deepest secrets. He usually is a detached eccentric and has no stake in the outcome of the situation in the story. Thus, he uses his powers to expose the guilt of a specific individual rather than exposing some general guilt in which the reader might share. The fourth group of characters, those who are threatened by the crime, represent middle-class society. They are respectable, decent people who are drawn into the crime and have no protection against being charged since the police are as likely to arrest the innocent as the guilty. They are thrown into chaos by the crime. They elicit sympathy and fear in the audience, but the fear is alleviated when the detective proves that the guilty party is one individual (Cawelti 91-96). Finally, the narrator can be the Watson-like figure who is involved in the story and close to the detective but unable to follow

his complete line of reasoning. Or the narrator may be a detached anonymous voice who observes the action of the detective but does not delve into his thought processes. The third type of narrative is the type used by Wilkie Collins in The Moonstone in which a number of narrators tell the story from different points of view. This technique, however, is largely unsuccessful and unpopular, according to Cawelti (83-84).

Characterization was important to Christie, and a study of her novels shows that she spent considerable time developing them to fit her formula but also stretching them to their limits, vitalizing them as stereotypes. Of her detectives, she was much more fond of Miss Marple than Hercule Poirot. She tired of Poirot, the "complete egotist," but felt stuck with him because of his popularity. The elderly spinster, Miss Marple, reflects a fondness Christie had for village life, curiosity, and genteel living. Christie's characters come alive for her, and like humans they have their flaws. She reacted to them in human terms, which is another factor that readers find so appealing about her novels. The characters assess a human quality that grows with each edition.

Writing in the Sherlock Holmes tradition, Christie created her main detective, Hercule Poirot, as a fastidious little man, now retired, but who was adept at solving the most baffling cases. The Christie-admitted flaw in

Poirot was, of course, his age--he was old from the beginning and had to survive too lengthy a span of time. He is a master sleuth who can rifle the most obscure clues in his diligent search for the missing link in the mystery. He is brilliant and ambiguous with seemingly magical powers to expose others' deep secrets. He is detached and eccentric with no personal interest in the resolution of the case. He uses his powers to expose the guilt of one individual rather than projecting guilt in general on a class of people.

Interspersed among thirty-six Poirot novels are thirteen featuring Miss Marple, a curious and very perceptive elderly lady who resides in St. Mary Meade. Miss Marple is more personable than Poirot, but she also is as aristocratic and genteel. Her softer, more human qualities, however, do not diminish her role as a sleuth. She is brilliant, though not conceited. She blends intuition with scientific reasoning, as does Poirot, and she excels in her capacity for psychological analysis because she has studied people for years. She is not especially eccentric, but she does have peculiarities stemming from the fact that she is a true Victorian Englishwoman living in a modern world. Like Poirot, she has a somewhat magical power to expose others' deepest secrets; and in the end, she proves the guilt of one specific individual,

thereby restoring order to the world and saving the innocent from the chaos of the crime.

Christie's victims are intentionally poorly developed so as not to allow the audience to become too attached to them. The victim is developed to some extent so the audience cares who killed him and why. But Christie usually presents just enough information to justify a thorough investigation after his death. Usually it is the method of murder that is the focus of the investigation, thereby distancing the investigation from the victim himself. The reader usually feels little sympathy for the victim and is more interested in how, why, and by whom he was killed. Christie does experiment with the role of the victim in Curtain, making the three victims more major characters who elicit some emotion and sympathy in the reader upon their deaths. But by and large, the victims are usually kept out of the mainstream of the story in Christie.

The criminals, furthermore, are typical stereotypes in Christie's novels. While she experiments with this role, too, usually the criminal is presented as all bad, and his guilt is rarely blurred by emotion. The reader does not become too interested in his motives or his character; however, he can be complex and intriguing. When Christie experiments with the role of the criminal, frequently the formula breaks down. In Curtain, she

allows her Belgian detective, heretofore a paragon of virtue, to succumb to the clutches of evil and to kill. Obviously making a statement about universal guilt, the novel breaks down because the theme becomes unmanageably complex for a piece of detective fiction. The reader gets tied up in the character of the killer; the criminal's guilt is blurred by emotion; and the guilt, itself, is difficult to define. There is no real order restored at the end, and the novel becomes far less successful than some of her other novels. A similar situation occurs in The Murder of Roger Ackroyd when the narrator turns out to be the guilty party. The reader ultimately begins to distrust the narrative technique because the narrator can color the clues as they are presented to the audience. Christie was accused of cheating in the novel, a charge she refutes. Nevertheless, the formula was breached; the plot became unmanageably complex; and the criminal's guilt is difficult to define.

There is little to say about the minor characters in Christie's novels except that they are mere cogs in the wheel of the plot. They do generally represent the middle class thrown into the chaos of the crime and unable to do anything about it. They do elicit sympathy because they, in their innocence, become suspects and have no protection from the police and misdirected justice. There are a few minor characters who shine in Christie, like Caroline in

The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, but on the whole they are usually ordinary people with whom the reader can identify.

Christie does have bumbling inspectors. Inspector Japp appears in a number of Christies. He usually arrives midway through the story and is always unable to solve the crime without Poirot's help. Inspector Slack, a member of the Much Benham police force, appears also as the stereotypical bumbling inspector who goes through the motions of crime solving but never manages to put the clues together to find the solution. There are others, including Inspector Last and Inspector Primer in Sleeping Murder, who are inefficient, seem to care little about the case, and have no feeling for the victims.

Finally, there is Hastings, Poirot's Watsonian sidekick who doubles as narrator in several stories. Hastings first appears in The Mysterious Affair at Styles, Poirot's first case, and reappears in Curtain, the detective's last. The character of Hastings is more developed in some novels than others. Early on he functions primarily as narrator-commentator on Poirot's actions. Later, in Curtain, he takes a more decisive role in the plot and ends up solving the crime--of course with Poirot's help. As narrator, he is involved in the story and close to the detective but unable to follow Poirot's complete line of reasoning. Thus, he prevents the audience from prematurely solving the crime because the story is told from

his point of view. He emerges as more heroic in Curtain, but his function as narrator is unchanged. He still is an observer of the action and does not participate in Poirot's perceptions.

As we have seen, Christie experiments somewhat with the role of the narrator. In The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, it is the criminal who tells the story; in The Mysterious Affair at Styles, the vicar, speaking in the first person a good portion of the time, tells the story as though he were recalling it later in the future. He is not the stereotypical detective's assistant but rather a fairly objective narrator who mainly relates the facts to the audience. Occasionally, however, he does offer his own speculations about the crime. In Sleeping Murder, Christie uses an anonymous narrator to tell the story and observe the action. Because he is not a character, he does not offer speculations of his own. He merely imparts the facts as an unbiased observer of the action.

Finally, an examination of theme helps define Christie's appeal. Cawelti is right when he says the fundamental principle of the mystery is the investigation and solution of a crime (43). The mystery always presents a problem with a rational, intellectual solution. It is a complete scheme of cause and effect. But there are certain themes present in detective fiction, among them the themes of order versus chaos and the idea

of hidden guilt (Cawelti 97-103). Frequently, there is the theme of the triumph of good over evil, the predominant theme in Christie.

Christie was always concerned that good win out over evil. She was consistently on the side of the innocent victim and against the criminal. She wanted her heroes to represent the good and her criminals to be seen always as evil. When this theme becomes cloudy, as in Curtain, the novels break down.

Additionally, Christie focused on ratiocination as the way to truth, appearance versus reality, and order versus chaos. With her detectives, intellectual reasoning or ratiocination is always the way to truth. In nearly every case, Poirot and Miss Marple verbalize the philosophy they use to solve crimes; and on every occasion it is the same, aptly expressed by Poirot's concentration on the little "gray cells." Logical deductions, exposing hidden secrets, and collecting clues are the methods used. They are always successful.

The theme of appearance versus reality occurs frequently in Christie. Characters end up with hidden guilt that makes them different from what they originally appeared to be. The key to the present is always rooted in the past in Christie. It is nearly always some hidden secret that is the key clue to the mystery; and the detective, who is especially adept at exposing hidden secrets,

is always the one who uncovers the past. Certainly few things about a Christie novel turn out as the reader expects, especially with her techniques of false finishes and surprise endings. The appearance versus reality idea is as much of a technical device as a thematic one.

The theme of order versus chaos is nearly always present. The novel, usually opening with the characters in an ordered world, is plunged into chaos by the crime. When the detective finds and announces the solution, order is restored. Evil is conquered with the chaos, and the isolated crime setting is restored to the ordered universe. The theme breaks down somewhat in Curtain and The Murder of Roger Ackroyd because Christie was experimenting with the merging of key roles. As a result, the novels do not follow her normal formula. However, there is semblance of order at the end of each. Usually the theme is more clearly seen, and the innocents in the book are restored to a harmonious life once the wrong has been righted.

The quest to define Agatha Christie's appeal is not a simple one. There are a number of elements that operate in her novels on the whole successfully. She was conscious of her aim as a mystery writer and the formula she developed over half a century of writing. But she sought to update her novels and inject as much variety as possible into them. Sometimes her experiments failed.

But usually they worked. She deserves the title "Queen of Crime" because her novels follow the traditions of the genre and her devoted following remains. In times when readers have little to count on in contemporary fiction, Christie is consistently there.

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