

AGATHA CHRISTIE

Exeter Festival, 11th July 1995

So what is the secret of this phenomenal success, why nineteen years after her death and in a very different world, Agatha Christie still sells in her millions all over the world, why different cultures, different generations, different continents all still fall under her spell? I think one of the main reasons is that, like all long-lasting and successful authors, she creates for us a distinctive world of the imagination into which we can enter for our comfort, our entertainment, our relief and our solace. It is not a particularly realistic world, but that is part of its charm. The place is usually an English village or small town, fixed forever in the years before the last war, a society ordered, peaceable, hierarchical. We do not even see the whole of the village; the houses we visit are that of the squire, the doctor, the local gentry, the spinsters living on private means. If there are cottages sunk in disease, decay and poverty, we do not enter them.

And we know the inhabitants. To an extent they reappear as old friends: the rich newcomer with a much younger wife of mysterious background; the secretary or nurse, capable, efficient, with suggestions of still waters running deep; the servants, including the enigmatic butler

and the giggling, irresponsible and not very intelligent parlour-maids and house-maids. And although we know that the peace will be shattered before long by the atavistic horror of murder, there will be no really distressing scenes, no real blood, no putrefaction, no lasting pain. We are spared the gritty realities of the autopsy room or the forensic science laboratory as we are the black cap of the judge.

This is a <sup>enthralling</sup> comfortable world and this is part of its attraction. We can enter it with the comfortable assurance of established values, both moral and social, of a way of life dignified by decency and tradition, of reassuring orthodoxies and a nostalgic hankering for values which we fear we may have lost. I remember with what relief and passion we seized on an Agatha Christie during the darkest days of the war, when she gave relief and entertainment to millions as she does today. That is a formidable achievement and I think it partly rests on this ability to create for us a world which, within its own terms, is both familiar and credible. The literature of escape can be as important to our mental health as the literature of engagement.

Her second great virtue is, of course, her extraordinary ingenuity in fabricating a puzzle. This was not peculiar to Agatha Christie among the giants of the Golden Age

of the Detective Story, but no one managed to do it with such consistency. Time and time again she shuffles her well-known characters face-downwards with those cunning fingers, and time and time again we triumphantly point to the card we confidently expect to be the murderer, and time and time again we are deceived.

There are certain strategies of deception which she uses repeatedly, and yet we are still fooled. One concerns the eternal triangle. A and B have a loving relationship which is apparently threatened by the murderous intentions of C. When B is killed C is the obvious suspect, but by the end of the book we realise we have seen the triangle the wrong way up. It is A and C who are in love, A and C who have colluded. The deceptive triangle is the basis of three of her most famous novels, Death on the Nile, Evil Under the Sun and Five Little Pigs. A second strategy, frequently used but always effective, is that of the impostor, a character pretending to be someone he or she is not. An example is Invitation to a Murder, where nearly all the characters are other than they claim.

And there is the strategy in which she gains our sympathy for a particular character, making us see him or her as a possible victim, an object of sympathy not of suspicion. Once again we are seduced into looking

at things the wrong way round. She is brilliant, too, at placing a clue so cunningly that we misinterpret it or overlook it. One example often quoted is the butler and the calendar in Hercule Poirot's Christmas. We are told that the Butler goes over to peer closely at the calendar, and because Agatha Christie has cleverly planted in our minds the idea of a possible confusion of time and dates, we see no particular significance in this. But the clue isn't one of time or date; the clue is that the butler is short-sighted.

And with Agatha Christie literally any character in the novel can be a murderer. I have just been re-reading Ngaio Marsh's Singing in the Shrouds. In this novel, which is concerned with a murder on board ship, it is obvious from the first that the pleasant ship's doctor and the attractive girl who is one of the passengers will neither of them be guilty. They are there to provide love-interest. With nearly all writers of the Golden Age detective stories we can confidently strike out one or more of the characters as obviously innocent. We can never do that with Agatha Christie; even a child can be a murderer. With The Murder of Roger Ackroyd, that tour de force, it was, of course, the narrator. The only two characters you can safely eliminate from suspicion are Poirot or Miss Marple. Few of the murders would work in real life. Indeed, in many of the books, notably Murder

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at the Vicarage and A Murder is Announced, the killers could quite easily have disposed of their victims without the ingenious and occasionally bizarre methods they employ. But then we, the readers, would miss so much fun.

And then there is her great skill in telling her story. This should not be underrated. The ability to keep the reader's attention engaged so that we keep on turning page after page, unable to put the book down, is a rare and enviable skill. Agatha Christie's books have narrative drive, move sharply forward and are easy to read, largely because she makes such good use of dialogue, not only to illustrate character and give information, but to keep the story moving. Her style and her writing skills generally have often been criticised, sometimes brutally. She did not claim to be a <sup>poetic stylist</sup> good novelist. She herself wrote: 'If I could write like Elizabeth Bowen, Muriel Spark or Graham Greene I would jump to high heaven with delight, but I know I can't.' She recognised the limits of her talent and worked indefatigably and conscientiously within them. But her <sup>plain</sup> ~~simple~~ journeyman's style was perfectly suited to the books, as is her characterisation. Each of her characters is distinct, easily recognisable, clearly differentiated. With Agatha Christie we never have to go back, wondering who this character is. And her characterisation can be interesting and subtle. Perhaps we could discuss that later.

Then there is her universality. She is read by all ages and, as I have said, in all cultures. The critic, Robert Barnard, has pointed out how much her style contributes to this. She gives us the minimum of description. She may write that there was a gravel drive sweeping up to a large square house. Immediately readers all over the world see that house transported to their own country, their own imagination. One of the most interesting and extraordinary facts about her fame is how these essentially English books, set in a rural English setting, and unmistakably English in tone, in dialogue, in characterisation, yet have a universal appeal. The fact that the characters are so often close to stereotype probably helps. A very rich, newly arrived, mysterious incomer, an efficient secretary or nurse, a gossiping spinster, these characters can be recognised in any culture.

And she has created in Poirot one of the great detectives of her own or any age. I personally find this a little surprising, myself preferring Miss Marple. Poirot seems to me altogether too bizarre with his little grey cells, his patent shoes, his waxed moustaches. I suspect that his creator herself rather deplored the eccentricities she had heaped on her creation; indeed in the person of Mrs Oliver, the fictional crime writer who is Agatha Christie's alter ego, there is a suggestion that she did indeed grow

to find him rather tedious. But Poirot is a more effective detective than Miss Marple, who tends to solve her cases more by intuition and good luck rather than by rational thought. And eccentric though he may be, Poirot has that vitality which ensures a character's survival. All over the world, if you were to ask a stranger to name a great fictional detective, almost certainly he would speak either of Sherlock Holmes or Hercule Poirot. ~~Agatha Christie brings murder home to us, into our houses, our villages, our vicarages, our small towns, and in doing so, shows us that it is solvable and perhaps, like death itself, not so very terrifying after all.~~

~~Both are on, indeed, the level of Dostoevsky~~  
 They have much in common. Both are uncompromisingly analytical, unemotional, unmerciful & wary of women, relying not on intuition but on the dominant intelligence.  
 Both, indeed, the level of Dostoevsky.