

Bella Zamudio

Professor Raleigh

Honors Rhetoric and Critical Inquiry

15 November, 2022

### Agatha Christie and the Eternity of the Whodunit

*I expect you are all wondering why I've gathered you here today.* This classic line, often occurring when a detective has summoned together the cast of suspects, has become a trope in mystery novels, film, and television. Born in England on September 15, 1890, the creator of this phrase would become one of the world's leading detective novelists, her books outsold only by Shakespeare and the Bible. Dame Agatha Christie's extensive career writing mysteries solidified her as a world-famous creator, promising her a legacy in popular culture for years to come. Although her novels are a product of the times, sprinkled with viewpoints that a modern reader would wince at, her work was nonetheless important to providing the definition of a whodunit (a murder mystery in which the murderer is revealed at the end). The influence of Agatha Christie's novels and their effect on contemporary literature, theater, and film, cannot be understated in today's society. Her writing, formulaic yet unique, continues to remain valuable in modern society, even 46 years after her death.

Agatha Christie's mystery novels are all the same: a murder, a cast of suspects (all of whom are very likely to have committed the murder), a quirky detective poking and prodding about, a final assembly of the characters, and the big reveal. Yet it is this familiar formulaic structure that continues to delight readers and writers alike. English author Francis Wyndham (*The Other Garden*) considers Christie's works as "animated algebra," in which "she dares us to solve a basic equation [...]" (Wyndham 120). By providing clues to add together and red herrings

to eliminate, Christie challenges her readers to solve the mystery before her conclusion. Popular contemporary fiction novelists, such as Lisa Jewell (*The Family Remains*) and John Boyne (*The Boy in the Striped Pajamas*), have cited Agatha Christie as an inspiration for their own careers, as well as appealing to them as readers. Jewell states that, “For me as a reader, it was this addiction to the feeling of a puzzle just coming together, the clues appearing, and of trying to get one step ahead of her and knowing that I never ever, ever was going to get ahead of her” (“*How Agatha...*”). Christie’s mysteries may be unsolvable by the average reader, but her compelling style, with its twists and turns and thrills, has for generations drawn readers into the world of literature. Because the majority of Christie’s works were published during the time period spanning from the 1920’s to the 1950’s, it’s easy to jump to the conclusion that her works may appear too “old” and unrelatable for young readers to enjoy. Yet both Boyne and Jewell consider Christie’s works as a rite of passage for adolescent readers of today, with Boyne deeming her novels as an important bridge between children’s books and major works of literature. Although worn copies of *Murder on the Orient Express* or *And Then There Were None* may often be found on library shelves, the future of literature, specifically in the mystery genre, is influenced by Agatha Christie.

Christie’s impact extends beyond the sphere of written literature. Not only does she continue to influence contemporary writers, but she also plays a role in the world of theater. Her play *The Mousetrap* (1952), which set records for being the longest running show at the Ambassadors Theater in London and one of the longest running performances still in play today, has delighted thousands of theater-goers for years. *Smithsonian* reporter Israel Shenker stated that, “With every performance it seems less likely that anyone will ever build a better mousetrap. [...] Every night the play brings off its culminating surprise and then, during curtain calls, the

audience is enjoined not to reveal the denouement [...]” This iconic Christie-esque twist is part of what makes her so famous; her most well-known works are the ones with the least cookie-cutter endings. It’s clear why *The Mousetrap*, with an ever surprising resolution, has become so memorable. Captivated by Christie’s alluring style and comprehension of human curiosity, audiences have continued to return to the theater for 70 years, anticipating a thrilling ending to this whodunit. Additionally, *The Mousetrap* is a theater classic not only in England, but in the United States as well; for example, The Court Theater at The University of Chicago produced their version of *The Mousetrap* in 2020, 68 years after the first performance in London’s West End. The popularity of this production, even in current times, makes this a reliable way for directors to draw audiences into the theater, displaying that Christie continues to play a role in the modern world. Besides literature and theater, Agatha Christie has also assured herself acknowledgement in popular culture through a different facet: the movies.

Although America’s pastime was once considered baseball, it’s clear that many people now automatically turn to TV series and movies during their free time. With well-known actors portraying her iconic characters (like Poirot or Miss Marple), Christie emerges as a leading influence on the modern cinematic experience. In the past few years, Christie-inspired works have become box office sensations, such as the 2017 version of *Murder on the Orient Express*, deriving from the 1934 titular novel. With the star-studded cast including Kenneth Branagh, Willem Dafoe, and Michelle Pfeiffer, interest in this classic Christie story among modern audiences was greatly renewed. Kenneth Branagh also returned as Hercule Poirot in the 2022 version of *Death on the Nile*, another Christie classic with a heart-pounding twist ending. Modern filmmakers and celebrity actors have recognized that these works are still relevant to the entertainment industry and that audiences are perpetually intrigued by the formula of a whodunit.

Christie knew, approximately 100 years ago, how to appeal to audiences' curiosity in a way that would remain eternal. Filmmaker Rian Johnson also credits Christie as the inspiration behind his 2019 whodunit *Knives Out*. In a *Wall Street Journal* interview, he states, “I had grown up reading Agatha Christie's books and I wanted to do a whodunit forever. I got really excited about setting it in 2019 and the way it could maybe click with some things in America now. It's such a fun genre. There's an element of comfort food to it” (Morgenstern). This “comfort food” characteristic applies to the familiar structure of her books, which hold complex plots in comprehensible formats, allowing the storylines to be easily understood and enjoyed. This has inspired filmmakers to use the popularity of her whodunit formula to their advantage, by creating movies in the same genre and style. The lengthy list of movies and TV shows credited to or inspired by Christie have solidified her as an influence on the world’s entertainment industry, both to movie-goers and filmmakers alike.

Yet not every Christie-related film production has been well received. Agatha Christie enthusiasts, like many literary fans, are serious about remaining true to the iconic storylines and characters in the books. Although there have been many film and television adaptations, some versions of Christie’s stories are not favorites among eager movie-goers, as seen with the critical reception of *The Alphabet Murders* based on Christie’s *The A.B.C. Murders*. Tony Randall’s portrayal of Christie’s iconic detective Poirot, a highly specific Belgian man who is humorous at times yet sharp with his understanding of human nature, was not well received among devoted readers. “When Randall, playing Poirot, called himself a ‘Belgian snoop,’ he lost not only the support of the Christie fans, who knew that Hercule Poirot would never say such a thing, but that of the rest of the moviegoers, as well” (Atkins 7). The power of Christie to craft a character so artfully that fans know when a movie portrayal doesn’t match displays the distinctness of her

characters and her voice. Her renowned style and iconic characterization is what draws people in, and audiences want and expect a movie that seems to have seamlessly flowed from Christie's mind to the screen.

Besides being labeled as whodunits, Christie's work also falls into the category of cozies: fairly clean mysteries set in a quiet, generally English, communities or villages. Because of Christie's ease at attracting a wide audience within this comfortable genre, there are literature scholars who do not consider her a "serious" writer. Her works are, undeniably, dotted with various clichés, abstract predictability (one can guess what's going to happen, but not the exact resolution), and have at times been called "tedious" as author Michele Slung recalls hearing one established writer pronounce. Nonetheless, Slung counters this assumption by stating, "I hope you understand that I'm not trying to equate ubiquity with quality, popularity with literary greatness. No, I'm talking about the kind of impact that's simply so large we can barely see it." Christie's influence is often barely noticeable because of the way she has silently slid into contemporary culture, despite the fact that her works have revolutionized the mystery genre. It's true that the popularity of a certain form of media does not always reflect its quality, yet to deem Christie as a writer of "lesser" literature is a gross mischaracterization. Her novels are not silly, nor are they without purpose. Why Christie may not ever be considered a serious writer might be the biggest mystery of them all.

It's clear that Agatha Christie has endured the test of time, but why exactly? How can a woman who wrote cozies and whodunits, who is still considered by some to be an unserious writer, and who constantly used the same formula, continue to be relevant to popular culture? It can boil down to the very fundamentals of good over evil, both in a psychological and religious frame. "Tales of good defeating evil after a struggle are probably as old as humanity, but until the

second half of the nineteenth century [...] there were hardly any stories in which the struggle took the form of a mystery, with the unmasking of a *hidden* villain as the climax” (Wren-Lewis 147). Christie appeals to human nature’s curiosity, the *need* to know, as well as widespread religious concepts of good triumphing over evil, and so it makes sense why people are compelled by books in which the devil is disguised. The act of uncovering who among a cast of characters is a murderer, who is really evil within, makes the victory of good ever stronger. With evil so playfully prominent in her writings, Christie’s novels have even lovingly been referred to as “devilish art” (Wilson 114). Additionally, the ideas of ethics and morality dance into many of her most famous works, such as in *Murder on the Orient Express*, where (spoiler) the murderers get away with it. Psychologically, this is highly appealing, and makes for an entertaining and thought-provoking reading. Happy endings are popular, but ethically ambiguous endings are even better.

If Christie did not have a role in modern society, her play and novels would have faded into obscurity, familiar only to literature scholars and older readers. Thankfully, her works have made a mark on popular culture and modern society, immortalizing Christie as the mother of mystery. Of course, one can’t say that Agatha Christie provided the sole definition of what a mystery is; Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the creator of *Sherlock Holmes*, created the world’s most renowned detective, and Edgar Allen Poe, who many consider the father of the detective story, played a heavy role in defining the Gothic mystery. Yet there is something undeniably distinct in a Christie novel and her style of the whodunit. She may not be as recognized as her male counterparts, but she is nonetheless an influence upon the world’s view of the great mystery novel. Even if the true exposition is nearly impossible to predict, readers or viewers of her work will find themselves thinking, “I think the butler did it, and here’s why.” It might not be

“elementary,” but it sure is fun to use the “little gray cells,” as Christie’s fictional detective Poirot would say. Although Agatha Christie may seem to be unacknowledged in our society today, one must take a closer look. Her formulaic style choices, captivating whodunits, and spine-chilling memorable twists have made themselves present in modern writing, film, and theater, and promise to stay for a long, long time.

## Works Cited

Atkins, Irene Kahn. "Agatha Christie and the Detective Film: A Timetable for Success."

*Twentieth-Century Literary Criticism*, edited by Lawrence J. Trudeau, vol. 333, Gale, 2016, pp. 6-11. *Gale Literature Criticism*, Accessed 30 Oct. 2022. Originally published in *Literature/Film Quarterly*, vol. 3, 1975, pp. 205-214.  
[link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/DZNNXA420423249/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=52060bae](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/DZNNXA420423249/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=52060bae).

"How Agatha Christie Turns Readers into Bestselling Novelists." *Penguin Books UK*, 17 Feb.

2022,

<https://www.penguin.co.uk/articles/2022/02/agatha-christie-books-influence-legacy>.

Morgenstern, Joe. "'Knives Out' Review: The Giddy Pleasures of Virtuosity; Rian Johnson's

Latest Film is a Dazzling Whodunit in the Vein of Agatha Christie." *Wall Street Journal (Online)*, Nov 27, 2019. *ProQuest*,

<https://ezproxy.depaul.edu/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/newspapers/knives-out-review-giddy-pleasures-virtuosity-rian/docview/2318881802/se-2>.

Shenker, Israel "The Past Master of Mysteries, She Built a Better Mousetrap." *Smithsonian*, Vol.

21 Issue 6, Sep90, p86.

<https://ezproxy.depaul.edu/login?url=https://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9010080212&site=ehost-live&scope=site>

Slung, Michele. "Let's Hear It for Agatha Christie: A Feminist Appreciation." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt, vol. 110, Gale, 1999. *Gale Literature Criticism*, Accessed 30 Oct. 2022. Originally published in *The Sleuth and the Scholar: Origins, Evolution, and Current Trends in Detective Fiction*, Greenwood Press, 1988, pp. 63-68.  
[link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/KJKGNP301640925/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=b6e7d288](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/KJKGNP301640925/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=b6e7d288).

Wilson, Edmund. "Why Do People Read Detective Stories." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Dedria Bryfonski, vol. 12, Gale, 1980. *Gale Literature Criticism*, Accessed 4 Nov. 2022. Originally published in *Classics and Commercials: A Literary Chronicle of the Forties*, by Edmund Wilson, The Noonday Press, 1950, pp. 231-237.  
[link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/VZTDTP022520737/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=17db7b2f](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/VZTDTP022520737/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=17db7b2f).

Wren-Lewis, John. "Adam, Eve, and Agatha Christie." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Jeffrey W. Hunter and Deborah A. Schmitt, vol. 110, Gale, 1999. *Gale Literature Criticism*, Accessed 30 Oct. 2022. Originally published in *The Chesterton Review*, vol. 19, no. 2, May 1993, pp. 193-199.  
[link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/EUJOXR442745192/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=9bc01546](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/EUJOXR442745192/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=9bc01546).

Wyndham, Francis. "Animated Algebra." *Contemporary Literary Criticism*, edited by Dedria Bryfonski, vol. 12, Gale, 1980. *Gale Literature Criticism*, Accessed 30 Oct. 2022.

Originally published in *The Times Literary Supplement*, 26 Sept. 1975, p. 1078.

[link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/RJHEHK323155298/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=7440ebb9](https://link-gale-com.ezproxy.depaul.edu/apps/doc/RJHEHK323155298/LCO?u=depaul&sid=bookmark-LCO&xid=7440ebb9).