

Beyond the Formula: Reappropriating Agatha Christie's Detective Fiction

Swapnil Srivastava

B.Tech (CSE), IV Year, IIT GUWAHATI

Abstract:

Agatha Christie is one of the most popular and well-known detective fiction writers of all time. Her works have been adapted for stage, screen, and television, and her characters have become iconic cultural figures. However, despite the enduring popularity of her works, there is a tendency among readers and critics to view her writing as formulaic and lacking in literary sophistication. This reductionist approach overlooks the genuine experimental aspects of her writing, as well as the potential for critical engagement and reappropriation. This paper seeks to challenge the notion of Agatha Christie's detective fiction as formulaic and explore the possibilities for reappropriative criticism. In particular, the focus will be on the importance of re-reading her works as literary texts, rather than simply as examples of a popular genre. Through close analysis of specific novels, this paper will demonstrate the potential for reappropriation to reveal the complexities and experimental qualities of Christie's writing. Agatha Christie's works have been subjected to various interpretations and analyses over the years, ranging from biographical readings to formulaic analyses. The present paper argues the importance of reappropriative criticism and close reading in order to rediscover the literary value of Christie's works and resist the genre's textual authority. By examining Christie's novels as literary texts, rather than simply as puzzle-solving exercises or formulaic products of mass culture, we can appreciate the experimental and non-patterned aspects of her writing.

Keywords: Reappropriation, authority, adaptation, authorial regeneration

Agatha Christie is one of the most popular and well-known detective fiction writers of all time. Her works have been adapted for stage, screen, and television, and her characters have become iconic cultural figures. However, despite the enduring popularity of her works, there is a tendency among readers and critics to view her writing as formulaic and lacking in literary sophistication. This reductionist approach overlooks the genuine experimental aspects of her writing, as well as the potential for critical engagement and reappropriation.

This paper seeks to challenge the notion of Agatha Christie's detective fiction as formulaic and explore the possibilities for reappropriative criticism. In particular, the focus will be on the importance of re-reading her works as literary texts, rather than simply as examples of a popular genre. Through close analysis of specific novels, this paper will demonstrate the potential for reappropriation to reveal the complexities and experimental qualities of Christie's writing.

The present paper examines the various heteronomous agendas that surround Christie and her works, including biographical interest, the Christie industry, and fan culture. These agendas can obscure the literary merit of her writing and prevent critical engagement. The second section of the paper argues that re-reading Christie's detective fiction is a means of resisting the textual authority of the genre, as well as overturning the notion of her novels as inherently stable and formulaic. The final section of the paper states that reappropriative criticism is essential for a full appreciation of Agatha Christie's detective fiction. By going beyond the formulaic elements of her writing and engaging with her works as literary texts, we can uncover the experimental aspects of her writing and challenge the established critical orthodoxies.

One of the main reasons why Agatha Christie is a "victim of her own success" is that her popularity and fame have overshadowed her work. People are so enamoured with her persona that they often forget that she was a writer first and foremost. Even after her death, Christie's life continues to be reassessed and reinterpreted, which can hinder the critical renewal of her works.

For instance, the International Agatha Christie Festival held in Torquay in 2015 showcased how her image continues to be redefined. Claire Cohen, a journalist from The Telegraph, remarked that there is a new movement to portray Christie "Imagine crime writer Agatha Christie and you probably think of Miss Marple—her grey-haired heroine. But a new movement is underway to rewrite the world's bestselling female author as a 'bit of a goer'". This type of reappropriation can make it difficult to assess Christie's work objectively, and it can lead to sound bites and labels such as "feminist icon," which may not accurately reflect her intentions or beliefs.

It's important to note that while Christie's life and personal beliefs may be of interest, it's the textuality of her writing that is crucial to understanding her work. Merja Makinen, a feminist critic who has investigated femininity in Christie's work, takes great care to avoid terms such as "proto-feminist"(38). Instead, she focuses on the text itself, examining how Christie portrays female characters and the power dynamics between men and women in her stories.

Therefore, while it's natural to be fascinated by Christie's life and legacy, it's important not to lose sight of the fact that she was an accomplished writer who crafted intricate plots and memorable characters. Ultimately, it's the text itself that should be the focus of critical analysis and renewal, rather than the endless reassessment of Christie's personal life.

Given the focus of this research on Agatha Christie's detective fiction as a text, it is appropriate to begin with a discussion of an emerging genre or sub-genre in the field, namely *authorial regeneration*. The trend of authorial regeneration, where new authors take up the mantle of famous characters, is part of this overlapping of author and protagonist. This trend works against the death of the author and allows for continued exploration of well-loved characters. Anthony Horowitz's new Sherlock Holmes stories and forthcoming James Bond novel are other examples of this trend. In contrast to the death of the author, authorial regeneration works to revive the author's creation. The review of Hannah's novel included in this volume notes the theme of the death of the detective and how it is subverted in this genre.

Christie's own creation, Hercule Poirot, was killed by his author, who initially intended to withhold this information from the public until her death. However, their posthumous careers overlap significantly, as demonstrated by the popularity of David Suchet's depiction of 'Poirot' in the UK television adaptations. Sophie Hannah's novel also serves as a fitting example of authorial regeneration, as it bears her name as the author, that of Agatha Christie, and that of Hercule Poirot, thus highlighting the parallelism between author, protagonist, and adapter. As a result, it seems that Christie's work and Poirot's character have become almost inseparable in the public consciousness.

In this way, Christie has become a victim of her own success, with her personal life and the character of Poirot overshadowing her actual writing. However, it is important to remember that Christie's legacy is her writing and her contributions to the mystery genre. While it is interesting to consider the author and the characters she created, it is the text itself that should be the primary focus for anyone looking to truly understand Christie's work.

At first glance, the process of adaptation and regeneration of Agatha Christie's detective fiction appears to be an open-ended affair, where the possibilities for interpretation are endless. This notion of open-endedness would seem to appeal to critics like Pierre Bayard, who champion a form of "detective criticism" that rejects the notion of textual closure. Bayard sees closure as a material, rather than a subjective, construct and insists that all texts remain open to multiple readings: 'the notion that a text includes only a limited number of readings – is a material closure, but not necessarily a subjective closure' (cited in Knight, 13). According to Bayard, even Christie's most renowned works, like *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*, should not be regarded as a done deal, but rather as an open invitation to solve the crime and engage with the text in new ways.

By rejecting the notion of closure, Bayard allows detective fiction to become a true hunting ground for clues and truths, rather than a mere vehicle for a predetermined solution. Without such an approach, detective fiction risks becoming a transparently meaningful readerly text, where the clues are predetermined to coincide with the given solution. In short, detective fiction has the potential to be a writerly text, where the reader engages in active interpretation rather than passive digestion, and it is this potential that is unlocked through a refusal to accept closure as final.

Bayard has been a pioneer in the rejuvenation of detective fiction by rejecting the traditional approach of focusing on the solution at the end of the story. However, other critics have also criticized the emphasis on endings in the study of Agatha Christie's works. According to Gill Plain, the potential for transgression within the detective fiction genre does not lie in its conclusions, but instead, it can be found in the writing leading up to the ending - in the body of the text itself. This writing demands that readers revisit these seemingly familiar fictions in a new light (Plain, 6).

Plain argues that the genre's subversive potential is not found in the conclusions but in the body of the text itself. This emphasis on the importance of the text's body rather than its conclusion is reminiscent of Jean-Paul Sartre's attempt to existentialize the novel by focusing on the protagonist's real-time experiences in *Nausea*. By doing so, Sartre aimed to reject the idea that the novel is inexorably propelled towards a predetermined conclusion.

Makinen also shares these concerns, arguing that concentrating solely on the ending of a novel can lead to a *fetishization* of the detective character at the expense of other characters. He feels that the analysis on the ending rather than the process of the novel enables a “fetishization of the detective to the detriment of all other characterisations” (96). This viewpoint is significant coming from Makinen, a scholar who does not typically view fetishization as a negative phenomenon. As such, these critics argue that the study of detective fiction and other genres should prioritize the entire production process rather than solely focusing on the resolution or conclusion. By doing so, we can gain a deeper understanding of the genre's potential for subversion and the characters who inhabit these stories.

Agatha Christie's success has created various challenges, as she has become a larger-than-life figure after her death, which hinders the critical renewal of her works

It is quite surprising that mathematics can also be employed to unleash a text's potential for multiple interpretations. The Oulipo School, a French-based think-tank for 'potential literature' that has featured writers such as Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau, and Italo Calvino, is a prime example. Oulipian authors begin with an extremely rigid set of formal constraints, frequently in the shape of mathematical formulas that mould their literature but also, crucially, make the text explode. While the authors establish the formulas (thereby controlling the text), the text grows exponentially to the point where control ultimately equates to its own loss. It's no surprise that these writers are also fascinated by conceits such as the locked-room mystery, whose hermeneutics of the hermetically sealed is simply an expression of self-alterity, an indication that the room was inevitably breached or, conversely, never occupied.

One can only imagine how scholars would react to the sight of David Suchet promoting a new mathematical formula that supposedly solves the perennial question of whodunit. To celebrate Agatha Christie's 125th birthday, a group of UK scholars have used computational methods to decode her novels and prove Poirot's truth. Their findings, represented by the formula " $k, r, \delta, \theta, c = f\{rk + \delta + \theta P, M, c(3 \leq 4.5)\}$," appear to reinforce the long-standing notion that detective fiction is formulaic. This conveniently frees readers from the effort of engaging with Christie's texts, effectively negating the need to read them altogether. According to The Sydney Morning Herald, this new mathematical formula poses the "greatest mystery in fiction" - namely, how Christie came up with her plots and solutions.

This comparison of the relationship between mathematics and literature highlights the dichotomies present in the detective fiction genre: structure versus innovation, stability versus mobility, and the singular solution versus multiple possibilities. These dichotomies suggest that Christie's contributions to the genre are more complex than commonly believed, and that her work warrants a closer examination that takes into account its intricacies. It is felt that re-reading a text is a playful act that aims to preserve the text by highlighting its differences, rather than uncovering a deeper or truer meaning.

In contrast, the adaptations of Christie's work that have become popular recently, with David Suchet as the ubiquitous public face, tend to be less ludic, and more focused on reproducing what is already anticipated. These adaptations reinforce the idea of an ending, coinciding with the author's

relinquishment of the creative act that is typically associated with the publication of a complete work. For an adaptation to be truly creative, it requires critical distance from the original text.

As the author suggests a re-reading of Christie's work that acknowledges its complexity and plays with its possibilities can be a liberating and transformative experience for readers. It allows us to break free from the constraints of repetition and self-coincidence, and to appreciate the creative potential of detective fiction beyond its conventional structure

Interestingly, the review takes a different approach than the David Suchet trend, using a photo of Geraldine McKewen as Miss Marple, accompanied by a photo of Christie herself in which she is a young woman with her head tilted at the same angle as Miss Marple's. This creates a distinct tension between the renewed interest in Christie as a person and the critical disinterest in her novels, given that their mysteries have already been solved. The research was commissioned by UKTV's Drama channel to celebrate the Agatha Christie Hour, during which ten of her most famous stories will be screened to mark the 125th anniversary of her birth. However, the paradoxical title "Agatha Christie Hour" both celebrates renewal and constricts the solution, condensing it into a mere 60 minutes and leaving little room for Bayard's brand of detective criticism

.Bayard's approach to detective fiction provides a necessary critical distance that allows us to re-evaluate and appreciate Agatha Christie's works in a new way. Stephen Knight has described Bayard's interpretation of *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd* as "sensational" and "puzzling" but Knight's own critical mission is also a form of re- evaluation that seeks to heed the voices of the text itself (105). While Knight's method may appear more traditional, as it focuses on the established meanings of- the text, it still manages to rescue the original literary vitality from the prevalent scholarship that fixates on solving the mystery and the endings of Christie's works. Therefore, both radical and non-radical forms of reappropriative criticism are crucial for a genuinely critical engagement with Christie's works. This requires a renewed attention to the literary text itself through rereading, which is indispensable in comprehending Christie's work beyond its endings.

Thus, the act of 'reappropriating' Agatha Christie refers to disregarding the external influences that have arisen around her work and focusing on the novels as literary texts. There are various external factors that have created a heteronomous agenda, which deflects attention from the novels themselves. For instance, there has been a growing interest in Christie's biography, particularly during her birth and death anniversaries in 2015 and 2016. While this may have raised Christie's public profile, it has also diverted attention from her detective stories themselves.

Moreover, the Christie industry, comprising heirs, publishers, and television networks, has a vested interest in promoting and protecting a specific perception of the author and her works. This agenda rarely involves challenging established orthodoxies and may further distract from the literary merits of Christie's works.

In addition, the fan culture that surrounds Christie, despite involving extensive reading of her works, is often centered on encyclopaedic accumulation of facts rather than critical rereading.

Finally, the scholarly literature on Christie, as with detective fiction in general, has often taken the form of a historical overview, and there is still a lingering belief that this is uncomplicated literature with no need for in-depth critical analysis and interpretation. The notion of reducing Christie's writings to a set of mathematical formulae epitomizes this reductionist idea.

As a result, reappropriative criticism is essential to move beyond these external influences and appreciate Christie's novels as literary texts. It requires readers and critics to engage with the novels themselves, rather than merely accepting the predetermined interpretations provided by these external forces. This approach allows for a deeper understanding and appreciation of Christie's literary accomplishments, beyond the limiting scope of external influences.

To conclude, Agatha Christie's works have been subjected to various interpretations and analyses over the years, ranging from biographical readings to formulaic analyses. The present paper argues the importance of reappropriative criticism and close reading in order to rediscover the literary value of Christie's works and resist the genre's textual authority. By examining Christie's novels as literary texts, rather than simply as puzzle-solving exercises or formulaic products of mass culture, we can appreciate the experimental and non-patterned aspects of her writing. Christie's novels are not inherently stable or lacking in literary sophistication; rather, they are dynamic works that challenge and subvert genre conventions. It's high time for the people to indulge in a renewed critical engagement with Christie's works that prioritizes rereading and close analysis as well as seeks to uncover the literary vitality that has often been overlooked in the past.

WORKS CITED

1. Claire Cohen, "Surfing, Single Motherhood and Sexual Betrayal: Agatha Christie Should Be a Feminist Icon", *The Telegraph*, 14 June 2015.
2. Christie, Agatha. *The Murder on the Links: A Hercule Poirot Mystery* (Hercule Poirot Mysteries), Dodd, Mead & Co, US, 1923.
3. Gill Plain, *Twentieth-Century Crime Fiction: Gender, Sexuality and the Body* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001).
4. Merja Makinen, *Agatha Christie: Investigating Femininity* (Hound mills: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006).
5. P. A., "Researchers find a formula for how to spot whodunit in Agatha Christie's books", *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 August 2015.
6. Pierre Bayard, 'Who Killed Roger Ackroyd? The Mystery Behind the Agatha Christie Mystery', trans. Carol Cosman, New York: The New Press, 2001.
7. Stephen Knight. *Secrets of Crime Fiction Classics: Detecting the Delights of 21 Enduring Stories*, Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland, 2015.