

Mystery and suspense in The ABC Murders

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ABSTRACT

The ABC Murders is a novel about a serial murderer who kills his victims in an alphabetical order. What seems as actions of a murderous maniac is, however, a carefully elaborate murder plan whose motive is completely different from alleged motive. The ABC Murders is an atypical story of Agatha Christie. Murders in her novels are usually committed in private places where readers soon know everybody who could be a murderer. However, Franklin Clarke, a murderer in this novel, appears for the first time in the middle of the story. Murders are done in public places and victims seem to have nothing in common except for the fact that they are killed in an alphabetical order. Moreover, the murderer is not so much the least likely suspect as never suspected at all.

Key words: Detective, novel, murderer, character description, crime, suspect, battle, mythological hero, loyalty.

1. INTRODUCTION

In the novel detective characters play great role since it is not secret that the characters of detectives play crucial role in detective novels rather than crime. The detective needs to be a memorable character, yet is not required to be the most sympathetic character in the story or even the protagonist. Integrating the detective's psychological and emotional issues into her effort to solve the crime can make for a well-rounded character. Most detectives incorporate the following traits:

- ✚ Detectives can be compared to mythological heroes (e.g., Odysseus) because they face challenges, temptations, danger, and usually have loyalty to a higher power
- ✚ Detectives are known as “private eyes” which refers to their ability to be “all-seeing”
- ✚ Detectives are usually well-educated and sophisticated, sometimes wealthy, too
- ✚ Detectives have physical strength and prowess
- ✚ Detectives tend to have a quick wit and/or sarcasm, and have superior abilities to the average citizen in things like card playing, shooting, car racing, etc.
- ✚ Detectives often defeat their opponents with language rather than simple brute strength
- ✚ Detectives usually asked to restore something: an object, a person, or peace of mind.

According to Christy Littlehale the most common detective stories` characters are:

Thus, the detective must be memorable. Fictional detectives are expected to be both clever and a bit out of the ordinary. They must have some small habit, mannerism, eccentricity, interest, talent – anything that sets them apart from the crowd. The crime must be significant in the novel. Traditionally, the detective novel is constructed around a murder or a great theft. Murder is a crime that cannot be reversed or made amends for; thus, it is a crime worth the detective’s (and the reader’s) time and efforts to solve. The criminal must be a worthy opponent. In real life, crimes are committed by ordinary, everyday, sometimes dull and stupid people. However, if fictional detectives are to show off their considerable skills, they must match wits with adversaries of equal cleverness. The mind of the criminal is often the intellectual equal of the detective’s.

2. ANALYSIS

The conflict becomes a battle of intellects between the detective, his/her opponent, and the reader. All the suspects, including the criminal, must be presented early in the story. Half the fun of reading a good detective story comes from the mental contest between the reader and the detective in a race to solve the crime. The reader must be able to safely assume that the perpetrator of the crime is one of the main characters in the story, not someone whom the author is going to slip in on the unsuspecting reader in the next-to-the-last chapter. All clues discovered by the detective must be made available to the reader. Like not springing any surprise suspects, this is another “fair play” rule to which the author must adhere. The reader must be given the same opportunity to solve the crime as the detective, and this means getting the same evidence at the same time it is made available to the

detective. Of course, an author may deliberately mislead the reader, as long as his fictional detective is similarly deceived. The solution must appear logical and obvious when the detective explains how the crime was solved. The reader must be convinced that he could have come to exactly the same conclusion as the detective. In the end, the reader must see how all the little tidbits of information fit together like so many pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. It is for this reason that detective stories are so appealing;

We will also feel sorry for Poirot, because of the decidedly downbeat, even valedictory, “The ABC Murders,” in which a killer writes teasing letters to Poirot and slays his victims in alphabetical order. Not only is the detective’s adopted home of England suffering a fit of early ’30s xenophobia that cuts him like a knife, but he’s also a player in the late innings of his particular ballgame, a man treated dismissively by nearly everyone he meets; who is feeling his age, and badly dyeing his hair.

He is a very smart man, but he is looking for his criminals, in the footsteps, not like Sherlock Holmes. He has logical reflections, time-checking, he sees punctures. And always it is hidden from the reader, only at the end of Hercule Poirot always explains to people how he thought up everything and readers sit with their mouths open.

3. DISCUSSION

In the novel “The ABC murders” Agatha Christie expressed suspense from the title of the work. While reading the novel a reader feels suspense, he/she becomes anxious of thinking what will be next and who did the murder. The author created several victims and she showed Cust as ABC killer till the end of the work.

As all other stylistic devices, suspense can also be classified according to its strength. It is obvious that the strongest will be suspense which starts from the title, grows throughout the text and ends at the end of the text. We believe that weakest will be that suspense which comprises one sentence or one paragraph.¹

Besides the type of suspense described above, the material under investigation enabled us to distinguish the following types of suspense:

- ✚ Hidden suspense;
- ✚ Macro suspense;
- ✚ Micro suspense;

Suspense can be considered as hidden if it is not perceived without aided eye. As an example we can bring Elizabeth Bowen’s story “Tears, Idle Tears”. If a reader is not extremely attentive and does not penetrate deeply into the story, he/she will never be able to notice suspense and consequently, will never understand the essence of the story.

Macro and Micro Suspense are somehow interrelated with each other. They cannot exist without each other. The “The ABC murders” can serve as a good example of these two kinds of suspense. Suspense starts from the very title and ends in the last paragraph of the novel. But besides, there is noticed another suspense in the text that starts from the second page and lasts for a while, i.e. comprises a couple of pages. Namely this story made us think about distinguishing macro and micro suspense.

4. CONCLUSION

Thus, the aim of suspense is to keep a reader in constant interest, feelings of tension and anxiety, in the state of uncertainty and expectation and somehow prepare the reader for the logical conclusion of the utterance. It can also be said that this stylistic device causes psychological effect. Suspense is that element that keeps a reader turning and turning pages. It is a vital ingredient in almost any text - be it a story, a novel, a fairy-tale, or a poem. Some readers think that suspense belongs to mysteries and thrillers, but suspense is vital to all genres. Suspense as a compositional device consists of arranging the matter of a communication in such a way that the less important, descriptive or subordinate parts are amassed at the beginning and the main idea is withheld till the end of the sentence/paragraph/chapter/the whole text. Thus the reader’s attention is held and his/her interest is kept up.

Suspense can start at any place of the text:

- ✚ From the very title;
- ✚ At the beginning of the text;
- ✚ In the middle of the text;
- ✚ At the end of the text;

¹Phelan, J. Reading People, Reading Plots: Character, Progression and the Interpretation of Narrative. – Chicago. University of Chicago Press, 1989. – 2-3-p.

- ✚ Suspense can end:
- ✚ In the middle of the text;
- ✚ At the end of the text;
- ✚ And generally anywhere throughout the text;

Thus, we call the first suspense macro suspense as it comprises the whole text and the second one – micro suspense which is included in the macro suspense.

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